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SANDINISTA COUNTERINSURGENCY TACTICS

A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

JAMES M. MCCARL, JR., MAJ, USA
B.A., The Citadel, 1977

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

SANDINISTA COUNTERINSURGENCY TACTICS: An examination of the counterinsurgency tactics employed by the Sandinistas against the Contras in Nicaragua between 1983 and 1988, and the factors that influenced their development, by Major James M. McCarl Jr., USA, 164 pages.

This study describes the organization of the primary Sandinista counterinsurgency organizations, the tactics they employed against the Contras, and the influence of many factors in the development of these organizations and their tactical doctrine. These include; the Sandinista's experience as guerrilla fighters, the military influence of the Soviet Union and Cuba, the impact of the Contra and U.S. military threats, the military aspects of terrain and weather, and the effects of tactical and strategic time factors. Much of the material is from primary sources, and the study contains original tactical diagrams derived from these sources.

The study concludes that the Soviets and Cubans played a central role in shaping these tactics and organizations through their military advisers in Nicaragua and with the provision of substantial military equipment. Nonetheless, the other factors above caused the Sandinistas to modify the Soviet/Cuban doctrine to their own needs.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Thesis

This thesis will examine the basic military tactics and counterinsurgency organizations used by the Sandinistas against the Contras and the factors that influenced their development.

The Sandinistas conducted counterinsurgency operations that favored large units and heavy firepower relative to the scale of the conflict. They also made extensive use of the firepower and tactical mobility provided by the helicopter. The Sandinista counterinsurgency organizations and the tactics they employed were not unique. In fact, they were influenced by a combination of three sets of factors: (1) the Sandinista's experiences fighting the Guardia Nacional as guerrillas; (2) the military planning factors normally considered by professional armies, consisting of mission, enemy, troops, terrain, weather, and time (which the U.S. Army refers to by the acronym, METT-T); and finally, (3) the influence of Cuban and Soviet advisors and their lessons learned from Angola and Afghanistan.

Background

The rise of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, following the popular uprising against the Somoza regime, has become an issue of national security for the United States as well as the spark for an internal civil war within Nicaragua. The Sandinistas had pursued various revolutionary strategies, but a Leninist approach had ultimately led to their victory over Somoza. The forces of a popular uprising were already active against a weakening government. The Sandinistas simply took advantage of the situation by harnessing, organizing, and providing direction to a large and diverse body of the population that opposed Somoza for various reasons. As a leading faction of a broad-based coalition against Somoza, the Sandinistas legitimized their movement.

Following the collapse of the Somoza government, the Sandinistas were in a position to easily manipulate the political nature of the new Nicaraguan government. While a Government of National Reconstruction was formed, with representatives from many of the various anti-Somoza factions, the Sandinistas dominated. They had provided the leadership to throw Somoza out, and they continued in the leadership role. This position also allowed them to follow through with the Leninist revolutionary strategy they had begun. During this stage of a revolution, the Leninist

strategy advocates infiltrating key government positions and gaining the support of important disaffected groups within the country's society that are essential for running the country. Eventually, the "party" completely dominates all key government and civilian functions--a coup from within.

Following this Leninist model, the Sandinistas began to consolidate their revolution by systematically establishing a party monopoly on political power. They put particular emphasis on the security organizations as essential to their power base.

The Popular Sandinista Army (EPS), along with the Ministry of Interior (MINT), are the basic governmental organs of this extensive security apparatus that have defended the Sandinista revolution. In keeping with the Leninist model, Tomas Borge (Minister of Interior) and Humberto Ortega (Minister of Defense) are both members of the Sandinista Directorate, a nine-member junta that includes only the top and most trusted Sandinista leadership. As a result, the two organizations are closely linked politically. Operationally, they often operate together. However, the MINT has far fewer combat-type forces, and they are not organized for major long-term combat operations. Therefore, MINT forces are not the principal combat forces employed against the Contra combat units in the field. This mission is the responsibility of the EPS.

The EPS rose from a guerrilla force, created to oust Somoza, to a professional national army responsible for security against both internal and external threats. This transition forced the Sandinista military leaders to adopt a whole new mindset from the guerrilla warfare to which they had been accustomed.

The most immediate threat to the Sandinistas was the inevitable counterrevolution. It is from this concept that the term "Contras" is taken. The Sandinista leaders recognized the historical pattern of the Soviet Union, Cuba, and numerous other cases in which revolution was followed by counterrevolution. Armed with these examples, they pressed for a military force to deal with this anticipated threat.¹ Since it was essential to the consolidation of the revolution, the eradication of the Contras became the highest priority of the Sandinista regime. The perceived and real threat of the Contras led the Sandinistas to develop very specific organizations and tactics within the EPS to conduct a counterinsurgency war of their own.

The principal result of this process was the creation of the national-level Batallones de Lucha Irregular (Light Irregular Warfare Battalion, or BLI) and the local-level Batallones de Lucha Cazador (Light Hunter Battalion, or BLC).

Glossary

Batallon de Lucha Cazador (BLC): Light Hunter

Battalion--the primary counterinsurgency unit of the Sandinista Popular Militia (MPS). Also often referred to simply as a "Cazador" battalion. It has local counterinsurgency responsibilities and normally operates in a specific geographical area. The men who fill its ranks live in that specific area and know both the geography and local population well. It is controlled by the local EPS Brigade commander.

Batallon de Lucha Irregular (BLI): Light Irregular (Warfare) Battalion--the primary counterinsurgency unit of the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS). It has nationwide counterinsurgency responsibilities. These units may be deployed to any military region where there is Contra activity. However, they have been almost exclusively concentrated in the two military regions of most Contra activity (MR-5 and MR-6).

Comites de Defensa Sandinista (CDS): Sandinista Defense Committees. A local network of informants in a village or block of a city set up by the Sandinistas to insure the local population carries out party policies and to observe and report on counterrevolutionary activity.

Ejercito Popular Sandinista (EPS): The regular Army of the Sandinista regime. This includes the air force and

navy. Humberto Ortega (brother of Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega) is the Minister of Defense and controls EPS operations.

Milicias Populares Sandinista (MPS): Sandinista Popular Militia. Local/regional militia forces of the Sandinista regime. When active, these forces are under the control of the Ministry of Defense. Nicaragua is divided into seven military regions plus the Atlantic Naval District. The military region commander, an active duty EPS officer, exercises control of the MPS units within his region through his EPS brigade commanders. Each EPS brigade has a geographically assigned area of responsibility. These brigade commanders directly command MPS units within their area of responsibility. Farmers assigned to live on Nicaraguan government cooperative farms are included in the MPS.

Nicaraguan Resistance: The official U.S. Government name for the Contras. It is a generic term that includes all Nicaraguan anti-Sandinista forces under a political umbrella organization. In theory, the armed opposition (Contra guerrillas) fall under the direction of this political body. In practice, it has been a very loose arrangement.

Pequenas Unidades Furezas de Especiales (PUFEs): Small Special Forces Units. Small (four-to-five man) highly

trained teams used primarily for national reconnaissance. They may also be used for some direct action missions.

Rear Guard: The administrative, logistical, and communications center for a BLI or BLC. It may also serve as a fire support center. It is the permanent or semi-permanent battalion base camp, administered by the Chief of the Rear Guard and manned by staff and support personnel of the battalion.

Strategic Hamlet: A concept often associated with Vietnam. This is a population control measure, in which segments of the population are moved from the guerrilla operating areas to deny the guerrillas potential support. This population is then concentrated in secure villages, located in key areas, that can support counterinsurgency operations by conducting militia functions.

Definition of Terms

In many cases, the specific term used by the Sandinistas is unknown. For this reason, I will use U.S. military terminology to describe activity which is analogous with U.S. tactics or doctrine. In other cases, the Sandinista activity may be clearly similar to a Soviet technique. In those instances, I will use Soviet terminology.

Deliberate Attack: (U.S. term) A carefully planned and coordinated attack based on a thorough reconnaissance and

sound intelligence. It is conducted against Contra forces of a generally known strength at a known location.

Movement to Contact: An offensive operation designed to gain initial ground contact with the enemy or to regain lost contact. For the purpose of this study, this is also termed a "sweep". It is designed to clear a specific geographic area of resistance forces by moving through the area in force with the intent of making contact with resistance units and destroying or capturing them. It may also be used to conduct a show of force to keep Contra units from establishing permanent base camps.

Pre-Battle Formation: (Soviet term) A movement formation used to transition from movement to attack formation. As a unit moves to the objective in a single column, it splits into several parallel columns that continue toward the objective in the pre-battle formation. This allows them to deploy on line more easily for the attack formation.

Revolutionary Strategy: (Also known as Guerrilla Strategy). The strategy devised by the insurgent to achieve his goal of overthrowing an established government and installing his own political entity as the new government. There are several models for revolutionary strategies that serve as a common basis for study, though most insurgencies are unique and often combine various aspects of several

different models. This thesis refers to four specific revolutionary models that played a part in Nicaragua:

A. The Foco model. Often referred to as the Cuban model, its main proponents have been Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Regis Debray. The central ideas of the *foco* theory are: (1) irregular forces can defeat a regular army, (2) an active insurgency will create an environment favorable for revolution, and (3) the insurgents are most secure operating in remote areas away from urban populations.² A key point to this strategy is the secretive nature of the insurgents. The guerrillas avoid open contact with the local people in order to protect them from implications of guerrilla collaboration and government reprisal. The guerrillas seek to remain unknown to the populace and recruit only limited direct supporters.

Conversely, the guerrillas keep the location of their bases secret to prevent government attacks inspired by the indiscretions of local villagers.³ The guerrillas are completely clandestine. Operating from secret remote locations, the guerrillas would strike at government troops and facilities. Their successes, in turn, would demonstrate the government's inability to maintain order and inspire spontaneous uprisings against the government. The *foco* strategy does not emphasize building a large popular support base prior to beginning major guerrilla operations as in the Maoist strategy. This lack of a large popular support base

means that the guerrillas do not have extensive resources to help with intelligence, security, logistics, or other matters. Additionally, local populations do not bond easily with clandestine foco-style guerrillas because of the intentional separation and may even tend to support the government against them.

B. The Maoist model. This model advocates a prolonged struggle in which all aspects of the insurgency are under the political direction of the party. It depends upon the development of a large base of popular support as an initial step. The model cites three phases of development (which may not be distinct, and which may revert from an advanced phase back to a previous phase before proceeding). These phases are: (1) the Latent and Incipient Insurgency, in which the insurgents emphasize the establishment of a popular support infrastructure by recruiting supporters and organizing the political and military structure at the local level; (2) Guerrilla Warfare, which emphasizes the establishment of liberated areas under guerrilla control and administration, and active engagement of government forces in guerrilla actions; and (3) War of Movement, or a conventional-style action, taken after the insurgents have built their strength sufficiently to take on the government's forces in large-scale battles.

C. The Leninist model. When the government is

weak and opposed by various groups, a small elite group of revolutionaries can infiltrate key civilian organizations, government positions, and opposition groups by intimidation, force, subversion and trickery. They use their standing within each group to gain legitimacy and organize a popular revolution against the government. The revolutionaries use terrorism and subversion to further weaken the government. Using pressure from key organizations in the civilian sector (such as trade unions) and inside the existing government, the insurgents will eventually force the government to collapse. They then consolidate the revolution under their leadership by placing party personnel in the remaining key positions.

D. The Urban model. This model seeks to create a crisis situation in urban centers through terror and violence, and force the government's security forces to overreact. This action by the government will be harsh on the general population, driving them to support the insurgents. Like the *foco* strategy, this approach is secretive, though it may also have overt legal appendages such as student organizations.

Limitations

There is little or no documented reference data on specific Sandinista counterinsurgency tactics. Therefore, much of the detail on the Sandinista tactics will come from

an earlier study I conducted which is based on personal interviews. This study is covered in detail in discussion of the research methodology in Chapter 2.

While my earlier study of Sandinista tactics was largely based on personal interviews, I will not have the same capability regarding Soviet or Cuban personnel involved in their respective counterinsurgency experiences. However, the concepts of the Soviet and Cuban tactical doctrine, including their lessons from Afghanistan and Angola, are sufficiently documented to make the necessary comparisons and analysis.

The specific details of operations of the Nicaraguan Resistance (Contras) will usually be classified material and not within the scope of this thesis. Since their operations are germane to the context of the Sandinista tactics, I will cover this through open source literature.

Delimitations

The study will cover Sandinista counterinsurgency tactics from 1983 to 1988. In 1983, the Sandinistas organized the first BLI. The organization of the BLIs, and subsequently the BLCs, evolved from that point until 1986 when the Sandinistas seemed to settle on a final structure. The tactical concepts remained constant throughout.

The study does not attempt to look at operations beyond

this point, as the Contra threat declined in the wake of funding cuts. The study will look at some historical factors leading up to these years to provide background. However, I will specifically focus on the years 1983-88 to examine the Sandinista tactics.

The insurgents' revolutionary strategy drives the nature of the tactics used by both sides. Therefore, I will explain revolutionary strategies and government responses to put the tactics in context. However, it is not the purpose of this thesis to provide a detailed study of various revolutionary strategies.

I will not cover Sandinista special operations units (other than the BLI and BLC) or the activities of the Sandinista Ministry of Interior (MINT), except to explain that there were other counterinsurgency activities conducted by the Sandinistas and how they fit into the counterinsurgency machine.

Significance

This thesis is the only detailed account of the specific Sandinista counterinsurgency tactics at battalion level and below produced to date. It will show how a third world nation, lacking technology and sophisticated weapons systems, adapted to an increasing insurgency threat.

It can be used as a reference guide for Special Forces personnel with contingency missions in Central America.

Additionally, it may provide some practical lessons learned for U.S. military thinkers faced with a similar threat.

ENDNOTES, CHAPTER 1

¹Department of the Army, Nicaragua, a Country Study ([Washington, D.C.]: Department of the Army, 1987), 191.

²David Nolan, "From Foco to Insurrection: Sandinista Strategies of Revolution," Air University Review, July-August 1986, 72-73.

³Regis Debray, Revolution in the Revolution ([New York]: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 41-43.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND SOURCES, AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Background

This thesis is based on both primary and secondary sources. In studying the Nicaraguan problem from 1983 to 1988, various assignments allowed me to develop a degree of personal expertise on this conflict. It also allowed me the opportunity to personally interview former Sandinista soldiers who had served in counterinsurgency units as well as some Contra combat leaders.

In 1988, I developed an informal, unclassified study of Sandinista counterinsurgency tactics based on these interviews and my other observations of the Sandinistas since 1983. This study has been informally distributed to various DOD commands and agencies as a supplement to their data bases.

The original study will serve as the centerpiece for this thesis; and, while the original study examined what the tactics were, this thesis will also look at how and why these tactics evolved as they did. To accomplish this latter task, I have employed a significant number of secondary sources.

Literature and Sources

Original Informal Sandinista Counterinsurgency Study.

In 1988, this study was the only existing detailed look at the Sandinista counterinsurgency tactics. It will serve as a point of departure for discussion of Sandinista counterinsurgency tactics at battalion level and below. It covers movement formations, the movement to contact, the deliberate attack, actions on the objective, the pursuit, fire support, logistics, and basing. It also includes details on the placement of special weapons and the organization of the assault formations.

In the 1988 study, I interviewed five former Sandinista soldiers who had served in counterinsurgency units or had been involved in the development of counterinsurgency tactics: a BLC battalion commander, a BLI platoon leader, a BLI communications officer, a BLC rifleman, and the commandant of the Eduardo Contreras Escobar Military School (a basic infantry counterinsurgency warfare school). I interviewed each soldier at separate locations and none had ever met the other. None had served in the same units. Two had served in the north along the Honduran border and the other three in the central and southern part of Nicaragua.

I found a strong commonality in the information each soldier provided, which I used to develop the study. In all cases, the soldiers described a double envelopment tactic

with a frontal assault. Organizations for march, command and control, the use of special weapons, and the employment of attack helicopters were also areas where each source provided similar information.

There were some conflicting accounts of how the BLIs were employed in the field. It appears that in the north along the Honduran border, the BLIs more often operated as battalions that staged out of base camps. Conversely, in the south, BLIs tended to stay in the field continuously with companies conducting largely independent operations. The reasons for this are rooted in the factors of METT-T, which are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

Captured Sandinista Operations Plan. Another primary source to be included in this thesis is information from a captured Sandinista operations plan, provided by Nicaraguan Resistance officials. It depicts a large scale, multi-battalion counterinsurgency operation in Soviet-style symbology on a 1:50,000 scale military map. The operation was planned for a location in central northern Nicaragua along traditional Contra infiltration routes from Honduras.

It is a key addition to the original Sandinista counterinsurgency study. That study examines operations at battalion level and below. This operations plan gives one example of how the Sandinistas would operate with several battalions at once.

The plan's most significant shortcoming is the lack of

text to describe the actual sequence of events or the fire support plan. However, Sandinista fire support is a relatively unsophisticated process, normally carried out by the organic mortars or rocket launchers of individual battalions, and this is covered in the 1988 Sandinista counterinsurgency study.

Newspapers and Periodicals. Newspapers and periodicals provide some glimpses into the Sandinista's tactics through stories on their larger operations. They also support judgments on the impact of terrain and weather.

One drawback to the journalists' viewpoint is the location of the war and their access to it. Most actions took place in the remote central areas of Nicaragua. The roads in much of this area are extremely limited (which is covered in more detail in Chapter 4). Often the only access is by helicopter. With the exception of official Sandinista journalists writing for the *Barricada* (the Sandinista party newspaper), the majority of the journalists either did not have a way to get there or chose the comfort of the accessible cities to write their articles.

For non-Sandinista journalists, the Sandinistas closed the door on many aspects of war coverage and opened only those it wished the media to see. Examples of this policy include the closing of *La Prensa*, Nicaragua's only major independent newspaper, because of its opposition to

Sandinista policies, and the barring of the media from events such as major arms deliveries from the Soviet Union to Nicaragua.¹

Since access to remote battle areas was almost exclusively controlled through the transportation provided by the Sandinista government, they had the ability to show the journalists only selected portions of the story. In these circumstances, there is always suspicion that the Sandinistas have staged the scene for the reporters to support their version of the action. Eduardo Ulibarri, editor of the Costa Rican newspaper, La Nacion, described the situation:

If a country is at war and major areas are closed to the scrutiny of the press, it becomes difficult for foreign reporters to turn down an opportunity to visit the field, even if the tour is organized by the government. How can one resist the invitation to visit the last scene of a Resistance attack, especially when correspondents from competing newspapers and networks are already on the bus? The Sandinistas are perfectly aware of reporter's anxieties and drives, and they have learned deftly to play on them. Even if the regime cannot avoid the direct observations or incisive questions of well-trained independent reporters on the ground, it can certainly stage-manage the scenario prior to the journalists' arrival in order to determine what part of it will be covered.²

Another drawback to the news journalists is the biased nature of reporting as a result of the extremely polarized nature of this conflict within American society. These biases run both in support of and against the Contra effort. The result is considerable attention to the dramatic issues, such as atrocities and human rights violations committed by

either side. While these are not small issues, the authors are often looking for items to support a preconceived conclusion. When this is their objective, clearly the tactics used by either side are irrelevant to the journalist, except as they apply to human rights.

The best source of information from journalists on this subject are the journalists who went with the Sandinistas or the Contras on operations. Good examples of these are the writers for Soldier of Fortune magazine. While the publication tends to sensationalize the action of war to the point of being sophomoric, the writers are usually former military personnel with an experienced eye for tactical items. They enhance their credibility by backing their stories with photographs.

Aside from Soldier of Fortune, there are few news periodicals that have been written from the battlefield. However, due to the restrictions cited above, most journalists resorted to interviewing witnesses of the actions after the fact. If carefully reviewed, these reports can help fill some of the gaps on the practical application of Sandinista tactics.

Books Written from the Battlefield. With the Contras, a book by Christopher Dickey, is perhaps the best account of the Contras' rise and the evolution of their operations in the years before the 1986 U.S. funding. It provides good

background material on how the Contra tactics developed from the very beginning and information on the low level tactics of both the Contras and the Sandinistas. Dickey traveled with Contra patrols and was familiar with their movement techniques, weapons, command and control, and typical targets.

On the Sandinista side, there are no similar accounts for the period covered by this thesis. However, Fire From the Mountain, by Omar Cabezas (the second ranking member of the powerful Sandinista Ministry of Interior), provides a look into the Sandinista's early guerrilla operations against the Somoza regime. It shows that the Sandinista leadership was intimately familiar with the terrain where the Contras operated, since the Sandinistas had operated from the same locations as guerrillas. Additionally, this book shows some of the difficulties the Sandinistas felt operating against large Guardia Nacional units supported by aircraft. These insights are valuable in examining the Sandinista's tactical mindset in the development of their own tactical concepts.

Books on the Sandinistas. The best source of material on the background and development of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) is David Nolan, a former U.S. foreign service officer. A detailed study of the Sandinistas is his book, FSLN, the Ideology of the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution. A shorter

version is his article entitled "From Foco to Insurrection: Sandinista Strategies of Revolution", which appeared in the Air University Review.

A good companion to Nolan is Nicaragua, the First Five Years, edited by Thomas W. Walker. Walker had spent significant time in Nicaragua and speaks from a position of experience. He gives a detailed account of the rise of the Sandinistas as guerrillas, their split and subsequent reconciliation over the direction of the war against Somoza, and the factors that influenced the rise of the EPS.

A similar book, Nicaragua Perspective, by Eduardo Crawley, provides equally strong substance to examine the transition of the EPS from a guerrilla force to a national army. These accounts are effective sources only up to about 1984; and, in Nolan's case, just through the fall of Somoza. However, they are very good baseline sources.

U.S. Government Publications. The most informative U.S. government publications were produced by the Department of State (DOS). The reason is simple. DOS is the overall coordinator of the U.S. policy in Nicaragua (and all foreign policy for that matter). One of DOS's principle missions is to inform the American public, and more importantly the Congress, on the substantive issues of this conflict. By demonstrating a clear threat and the tangible results of funding the Contras, the Congress would, in theory, vote for

further funding in subsequent budgets.

The State Department went to extreme lengths to assemble detailed publications to support the administration's policy. Though these are clearly documents produced for the purpose of supporting the U.S. position, the data accurately reflects the honest U.S. government appraisal of events in Nicaragua.

Because of the importance of these documents in shaping policy and public opinion, the State Department publications have the added advantage of being able to assemble U.S. intelligence community material in an unclassified form. Much of the material in the publications on Nicaragua is derived from intelligence sources and then released for this publication.

The State Department publications are most useful in drawing the connection between the Sandinistas and the Soviets or Cubans. They show us Soviet weapons systems in Nicaragua and give us figures on the financial and military assistance the Soviets are providing to Nicaragua. More importantly, they give us background on the Sandinista leadership and what influenced these people.

The most comprehensive source in this category is the DOS publication, Nicaraguan Biographies: a Resource Book. Though its title suggests it is biographical information only, in reality, it places those biographies in the context of the conflict by explaining the greater picture. It does

this by describing all of the various political, economic, and military groups and showing how each evolved. It explains their various agendas and some of the special issues (such as the militarization of farm cooperatives) that impact the conflict. It covers the major personalities on both sides of the conflict. This document should be a basic reference to anyone writing on the current Nicaraguan problem.

Another DOS publication that provides good information on the rise and transformation of the EPS is The Sandinista Military Build-up. This report provides material that helps to develop the Sandinista connection to the Soviets and Cubans.

Material Published by the Contras. A key element to this thesis is the ability to view the Contra threat in detail. This puts the Sandinista tactics in perspective. The Contras published the Manual de Campana Para Cuadros about 1986 to serve as a field reference manual. It shows basic low level tactical movement formations, ambush diagrams, command and control techniques, and field survival information. In addition, it provides wiring diagrams of the Contra tactical organizations. This is important because it reveals the Contras' intended tactical organization and the combat power at each level. Additionally, there is significant emphasis given to

the issue and techniques of gaining popular support among the population in Nicaragua, which provides some insight on the Contras' strategic objectives.

Books and Articles on Soviet/Cuban Tactics. There are a number of unclassified manuals as well as commercial books on this subject. The official U.S Army publication, FM 100-2-1, The Soviet Army, Operations and Tactics covers basic Soviet tactical doctrine.

To study the adjustments of this doctrine due to the Afghanistan experience, I had to supplement these with recent articles published on the subject. The most substantive of these are "The Soviets in Afghanistan: Can the Red Army Fight a Counterinsurgency War?", by William Derleth; "The Evolution of Soviet Military Doctrine", by Kip McCormick; and, "Low Intensity Conflict in Afghanistan", by Douglas Hart. Many of the points these articles emphasized as Soviet tactical modifications can be seen in Nicaragua.

Basic tactical doctrine used by the Soviets also permeates the Cuban tactics. The DIA Handbook on the Cuban Armed Forces describes Cuban conventional tactics. They are remarkably similar to Soviet conventional tactics and provide some insight into the basic Cuban military thinking. Articles showing the Cuban tactical lessons of Angola are fewer. The most relevant information concerns the use of the attack helicopter and its influence on tactics.

Material on Military Aspects of Terrain. In an

insurgency/counterinsurgency conflict, we view the military aspects of the terrain in a significantly different way from the way we approach operations in conventional warfare. Infiltration routes replace enemy avenues of approach. The nation's infrastructure (power plants, lines of communications, telephone and communications facilities, and other elements of the economy) become the targets of the insurgents. Simultaneously, government forces seek to identify, strike, and harass insurgent forces to deny them the initiative. Both sides actively seek the support of the civilian population.

In order to examine the tactics, we must understand the impact of these factors on the conflict. For example, knowing where the Contra base camps were and their traditional infiltration routes into Nicaragua helps us to understand part of the counterinsurgency problem from the Sandinista viewpoint. By placing ourselves in the Sandinista's position and reviewing the factors of METT-T, we can develop a good idea of the Sandinista thought process in fighting the Contras.

There are numerous sources of information on Nicaragua's geography, population centers, economy, transportation system, and other aspects that of the country. The U.S. Army's area handbook, Nicaragua, a Country Study, is the best single reference. It is an excellent source for

examining population densities and economic entities--both targets of the Contras. A good supplement to this is The Encyclopedia of the Third World, by George Kurian.

Research Methodology

Data collections are based on existing literature and previously conducted personal interviews.

I have analyzed the basic Sandinista tactics by comparing the information provided by each of the different Sandinista soldiers. While each individual provided some differing aspects, the information is a great deal more similar than different.

I further compared the information from the field soldiers to the information provided by the commandant of the small unit tactics school. Here the picture comes into better focus because we can see the "school solution" as the yardstick for comparing the "field solution".

A third perspective on the Sandinista's tactics comes from personal interviews of Contra field leaders--a limited source. This allows a unique view because it provides some measure of how effective these tactics were or how seriously the Contras took these tactics. When combined with the Contras' tactical concepts (as described in their documents), we can get a reasonable understanding of how the typical Sandinista counterinsurgency operation looked as compared to the typical Contra operation.

By reviewing material from journalists, I can get a fourth view, which also provides some information on more focused aspects of the Sandinista tactics. Good journalists provide a "spectator's view" of tactical operations. In addition, journalists provide good accounts of the terrain and peripheral activities such as the actions of the local population.

By examining all of these, I will establish a composite picture of the Sandinista counterinsurgency tactical doctrine. I will do this by comparing information from each source and grouping similar aspects within a category. For example, in the category of movement, I will look for commonality in the organization of the march column, the spacing of personnel, the placement of special weapons, the location of security elements, and other components. The composite picture will be a graphic with accompanying text, which describes the aggregate information as a single entity or example.

The Sandinista's basic counterinsurgency element was the battalion. The composite picture, created in the step above, will be for battalion and company-level units. However, the Sandinistas periodically conducted large-scale, multi-battalion operations. These take the form of either (1) large-scale movements to contact (or sweep) operations or (2) punitive cross-border raids against Contra operations

along the Honduran border.

These multi-battalion operations can be considered the Sandinista equivalent of the operational level of war because they normally are part of a military region's operations to implement major aspects of the Sandinista national counterinsurgency strategy. Unlike battalion level operations, these multi-battalion operations require a major logistic effort by the EPS. Accordingly, they must be examined as a separate entity from the battalion level tactics.

Since the organizations and activities at the operational level of war are more flexible than at the tactical level, the operational level is best examined through case studies. To do this, I will use the captured Sandinista operations plan as a case study of a large scale sweep operation. For the punitive raid, I will use media accounts of operations into Honduras in 1988.

Once I have established this composite picture of the tactics, I will compare them to (1) the Sandinista's lessons learned fighting the Guardia Nacional, (2) the Soviet/Cuban tactical counterinsurgency doctrine, and (3) the military factors that are specific to this particular conflict (METT-T). By doing this, I will explain why the Sandinistas operated in the field as they did.

The strength of this methodology is the original research based on primary sources that develops the core of the composite picture of Sandinistas tactics. On the other hand, I must rely entirely on secondary sources to examine the Soviet/Cuban counterinsurgency tactical doctrine.

ENDNOTES, CHAPTER 2

¹ Eduardo R. Ulibarri, "Covering Conflict in the Strategic Backyard: U.S. Media and Central America," Strategic Review, Fall 1988, 60.

² Ibid., 62.

CHAPTER 3

THE RISE OF THE SANDINISTA POPULAR ARMY (EPS)

Introduction

It is important to understand that the EPS is a national army raised from the remnants of the Sandinista guerrilla force and those people that joined the movement in its final months. It was essentially a manpower base with no conventional military experience. With the overthrow of Somoza, the Sandinistas swept away all vestiges of the Guardia Nacional. The officer corps and many of the noncommissioned officers were executed, exiled, or imprisoned. As a result, the Sandinistas were forced to create a professional army from the ground up without the benefit of an established formal military education and training system. In the absence of the old order, outside influences such as Cuba and the Soviet Union could easily fill the vacuum with their own military doctrine. This was especially true of Cuba since it had been a driving force in Sandinista revolutionary operations from the FSLN's inception.

The Sandinistas had also learned some important military lessons of their own during the war against the

Guardia Nacional. While they could be influenced by outsiders, they had been active insurgents long enough to develop their own military concepts. They had used a variety of revolutionary strategies against Somoza including the *foco*, Maoist, Urban, and Leninist models. As a result, they learned that the guerrillas' revolutionary strategy has a direct impact on the government's counterinsurgency tactics. Their experience fighting the Guardia, combined with the influence of Cuba's revolutionary and conventional military concepts, would be the leading factors in the early development of the EPS. This chapter examines these influences.

Sandinista Guerrillas Against the Guardia Nacional

As guerrillas, the FSLN had adopted not only the name, but also the tactics of Augusto Cesar Sandino--the famous Nicaraguan guerrilla leader of the 1920's and 30's who had fought against U.S. Marines and the Guardia Nacional of the first Somoza. Sandino was killed in 1934 and has since become a romantic hero in Nicaragua. His name has become synonymous with nationalism and anti-Americanism. Sandino's tactical method was to operate from remote rural areas over which his forces exercised partial control. His forces would emerge from these sanctuaries to strike at the U.S. Marines and the Guardia Nacional with hit-and-run raids and ambushes, while avoiding decisive engagements.

In the 1960's, the FSLN of Carlos Fonseca combined the romance of Sandino's mountain guerrillas with the Cuban *foco* theory (described in Chapter 1) to form the early Sandinista revolutionary strategy for Nicaragua. Clearly, the fact that Sandino's concept and the *foco* theory were militarily similar gave this approach strong support within the FSLN in the early 1960's. However, the use of the *foco* model had very distinct implications on the tactics of both the guerrillas and the government forces.

The *foco* approach does not emphasize building a large popular support base prior to beginning major guerrilla operations as in the Maoist strategy. In essence, it sacrifices a large support structure for the sake of security. As David Nolan notes:

The emphasis of the *foco* theory, reinforced by Regis Debray's 1967 elaboration, was on the independence of the rural military arm from (and predominance over) the Leninist party. In its extreme form, *focuismo* saw the guerrillas as a secretive military force almost totally "independent of the civilian population."¹

The problem with this arrangement was that by only controlling remote areas, the FSLN isolated itself from the population that it sought to convert to a popular revolution. Furthermore, since the *foco* strategy did not emphasize large scale political organization, it deprived the guerrillas of the popular support base which could provide manpower, intelligence, logistics, and security

support. Che's failure and subsequent death in Bolivia simply reinforced the tactical shortcomings of the *foco* approach.

Another tactical drawback to the FSLN's *foco* strategy was that it allowed the Guardia Nacional to easily separate the guerrillas from the rest of the population. This, in turn, meant that the Guardia could use heavy handed conventional tactics against the FSLN without significant fear of collateral damage to a friendly population.² Therefore, during this period, not only were the Sandinistas not expanding a popular support base, but also the Guardia could exploit their tactical strengths virtually unconstrained. These advantages consisted of tactical mobility through helicopters and trucks; fire power from artillery, small arms, and aircraft; manpower through a standing professional army; a functioning intelligence and security service coupled with the general support from the population; and a logistical sustainment capability.

The effects of this problem became extreme in 1967. The FSLN had been working for nine months to implement the *foco* concept with a small cadre of thirty-five men near Pancasan mountain in north central Nicaragua. But, informants gave them away; and the Guardia struck, inflicting heavy losses on the Sandinistas at Pancasan. FSLN losses (twenty killed), included a large percentage of their key personnel.³

As a result of the Pancasan disaster, the FSLN moved away from the foco concept. Initially, the FSLN adopted a Maoist strategy which they referred to as the Prolonged Popular War. They planned a protracted struggle that emphasized the organization of a support infrastructure first. They hoped to expand this popular support base, which would lead to the creation of liberated zones. Eventually, the movement would evolve into open warfare in which the FSLN could directly challenge the Guardia. The primary advocates of this strategy were Tomas Borge and Henry Ruiz.

Disagreement within the FSLN ranks over the progress of the Prolonged Popular War strategy subsequently led the FSLN to split into two additional factions in 1975. The Proletarian Tendency, led by Jaime Wheelock, advocated revolutionary emphasis within the urban proletariat rather than the rural campesinos. The Terceristas, led by Daniel and Humerto Ortega, called for the FSLN to lead a popular insurrection of disaffected Nicaraguan groups in a general uprising against the Somoza government. This could then lead to a Leninist-style takeover by the Sandinistas.

The three-way split within the FSLN was extremely divisive, complete with party purges and death threats to members of the Proletarian and Tercerista factions. Despite these internal problems, the net effect of these changes in

the FSLN's revolutionary strategy was to bring the insurgency out of the clandestine rural bases of the foco model and into contact with the population.

Members of the Proletarian Tendency and the Terceristas began moving into the cities, such as Leon. Meanwhile, the Prolonged Popular War faction continued active development of a popular support base in the rural villages. This integration had a profound effect on the tactical nature of the conflict.

The Zinica campaign of 1970 demonstrated this effect. For the first time campesino support allowed FSLN guerrillas to escape destruction from a major Guardia attack. Henry Ruiz asserted that the guerrillas were able to build a popular support infrastructure in rural Nicaragua because the guerrillas had begun to live with the campesinos and share their lifestyle. The FSLN had become part of the population.⁴

As a result of this, the Guardia no longer faced an isolated band of guerrillas that they could attack with whatever tactical means they chose. The Guardia now had to separate the guerrillas from the population in order to strike them, or risk significant collateral damage to the population. Unfortunately, the intelligence and security techniques used to ferret out the guerrillas can be equally as damaging as human rights become secondary to security issues. In this regard, the Guardia managed to cause

extensive collateral damage with their tactical operations, and achieve a dreadful human rights record through their security measures as well.

Following the FSLN's 1974 Christmas Day raid on a reception in honor of the U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua, the Guardia launched a major crackdown that reached new levels of severity. Some estimate that up to 2,000 campesinos, thought to be FSLN collaborators, were killed in an attempt to destroy the FSLN's support base.⁵ In addition, the Guardia began to use free fire zones.⁶ The following year, the Guardia's response to an FSLN attack on a Guardia garrison at Waswala was so harsh and indiscriminate as to cause protests from both the Catholic Church and Amnesty International.⁷ The Guardia had begun inflicting the type of collateral damage to Nicaraguan citizens that would breed the dissent on which the FSLN could capitalize.

The Prolonged Popular War, in particular, also had some tactical disadvantages. As the FSLN tried to move toward the "liberated zones" of the Maoist model, they found it tied them to specific geographic areas and reduced their mobility.⁸ In either the development or the maintenance of a "liberated zone," the FSLN's static posture ran the risk of a toe-to-toe fight with the Guardia--a premature prospect for their situation. Examples can be seen in the FSLN's failed attempts to seize the cities of Leon and Esteli. As

a result, the FSLN made very limited progress in this area.

The FSLN's split in strategies also led to disunity in the conduct of guerrilla operations. Without a united and coordinated effort, the FSLN continued to fight at a tactical disadvantage, and the Guardia could counter the FSLN's disjointed activities without major revisions in its organization. The Guardia stationed sixteen companies throughout the country for local security. In addition, there was a Presidential Guard Battalion and another combined arms battalion located in Managua. Finally, they maintained one other battalion specifically for counterinsurgency operations.⁹ As long as the FSLN activities remained an uncoordinated effort, the counterinsurgency battalion could defeat each effort piecemeal.

Omar Cabezas, now the Sandinista's Vice Minister of Interior, was an FSLN guerrilla during this period. In his book, Fire from the Mountain (163-168), Cabezas describes the Guardia's counterinsurgency tactics. In the summer of 1975, Cabezas was operating an FSLN military training school near Ocotal with three cadre and thirty students. This was in an area in which the FSLN was developing popular support in order to create a liberated zone.

The Guardia discovered the school and launched an operation to destroy it. The Guardia seized the city of Ocotal and cordoned off the suspected school site. As

Cabezas described it:

...the whole area was crawling with patrols. The zone was completely surrounded; they were coming after us. The Guard had helicopters, planes ...the usual shitload of equipment. They had intelligence on the school and were going to bust it up.¹⁰

As Cabezas tried to break out of the cordon, he noted that around the perimeter were numerous Guardia personnel dressed as campesinos. Their role was to lure out guerrillas who would be looking for help to escape. Nearby, uniformed Guardia personnel waited in ambush. He also discovered the presence of Guardia spies from among the local population, who had assisted the Guardia in rooting out the Sandinista's support infrastructure in and around Ocotal.

Despite the Guardia's tactical successes, by 1979, the FSLN had reunited its three factions and was actively coordinating its military operations. The Sandinista military strategy was to force the Guardia to be at all places at all times by applying pressure all over. In this way, they hoped to spread and dilute the Guardia forces and eventually wear them down.¹¹ For the "final offensive", they did this through four simultaneous actions: (1) a national general strike, (2) popular uprisings in six large cities, (3) a major military offensive against the Guardia in the northern and western portions of Nicaragua to secure those areas as liberated zones, and (4) a major military

action against the government's counterinsurgency battalion to tie it down near the Costa Rican border. This strategy proved successful in keeping the Guardia from massing its tactical units and achieving tactical superiority at any one point.¹²

In the end, it was a variety of factors that brought Somoza down. To a large degree, Somoza lost control through the slow and steady erosion of his political support throughout Nicaragua and the world, rather than military victories by the Sandinistas. There is also little doubt that some of that erosion was caused by the collateral damage inflicted by the Guardia's tactics on the population and its treatment of Nicaraguans living in insurgent areas. As Enrique Bermudez points out, especially during the last year of Somoza's regime, the Guardia "...carried out indiscriminate bombings of urban areas under his (Somoza's) orders."¹³

Interestingly enough, the elements that overthrew Somoza were not a mass popular support base developed by the Sandinistas in the Maoist fashion. Rather, they were the forces of a popular uprising against Somoza from all levels of Nicaraguan society, which the Sandinistas quickly harnessed to take them into power, as the Tercerista faction had advocated. It was the manpower from this popular uprising that swelled the Sandinista's ranks in the final months of the revolution. Until then, regardless of the

Sandinista revolutionary strategy, the Guardia was nearly always the tactical victor because of its tactical mobility, firepower, manpower, and intelligence system. Ironically, the exercise of that tactical superiority was one of the contributing factors that led to the disaffection of the general public.

Tactical Lessons from the Fight Against the Guardia Nacional

The evolution of the Sandinista guerrilla strategy and its military tactical applications spanned nearly twenty years. During this time, they had an opportunity to examine the Guardia's counterinsurgency tactics within the context of the changes in their own strategy. In so doing, there are at least four major lessons they learned the hard way.

First, large military units (battalion size), with good tactical mobility and air support, can be very effective against identified guerrilla concentrations--especially when the guerrillas choose or are forced to fight rather than flee. Since guerrillas normally do not choose to stand and fight, they must be induced. Speed in tactical mobility can help achieve this by allowing the counterinsurgency force to throw up a strong cordon around the insurgent concentration before they can escape, as in the example cited by Cabezas.

A second lesson is that if insurgents follow a Maoist strategy by attempting to organize and create liberated

zones, they may be vulnerable to a conventional fight if they choose to defend this area. However, there are significant risks involved in this. Indiscriminate tactical operations can alienate the local population through collateral damage and draconian security measures that lead to human rights violations against "suspected" insurgent supporters. This, in turn, can drive the population away from the government and into at least tacit support of the insurgents. The best prevention for this is to be active in areas where the insurgents can develop popular support and not allow the insurgents to establish themselves.

In order for the insurgent to organize a popular support base (whether large scale as in the Maoist model, or small and secretive as in the foco or urban models) he must have active contact with the population. The third lesson is that good intelligence through informant nets is essential to identify the development of an insurgent infrastructure. It is that detailed and accurate intelligence that allows counterinsurgency and security forces to operate efficiently and effectively against the insurgents.

A fourth and final lesson is that if the insurgency grows, the counterinsurgency force must adapt. The Guardia retained its tactical advantage as long as it had freedom of action to deploy its counterinsurgency unit to one insurgent

threat at a time. But when a multitude of insurgent activities occurred simultaneously, they could not respond. There must be redundant forces capable of counterinsurgency operations.

An Early Cuban Connection

While the FSLN's fight against the Guardia produced some important lessons, Cuban influence was instrumental in their development as guerrillas.

The Sandinista connection with Cuba and the Soviet Union extends well back into their earliest days as guerrillas in the late 1950's. The founder of the FSLN, Carlos Fonseca, was a member of a communist faction in Nicaragua closely aligned with Moscow in 1954. By 1959, he was operating in Honduras with a band of guerrillas, consisting primarily of Cubans, where he was captured and exiled to Cuba. In 1961, with Tomas Borge and Silvio Mayorga, he founded the FSLN. From that time until his death in a guerrilla operation in Nicaragua in 1976, Fonseca spent much of his time in Cuba. Tomas Borge, the only surviving founder of the FSLN, has a similar connection to Cuba.

Of the nine current members of the FSLN National Directorate, at least six were either exiled to Cuba or went there to receive military training prior to the overthrow of Somoza. Four of them were in Cuba in the 1960's, which led

to the heavy emphasis on the foco theory. Two other key Sandinistas, not on the National Directorate but who spent significant time in Cuba before the revolution, were Lenin Cerna (the Director of State Security) and Joaquin Cuadra (Vice Minister of Defense). Renen Montero, now a lieutenant colonel in the MINT, is a former Cuban intelligence case officer who handled the FSLN for Castro. In earlier days, he reportedly fought with Che in Cuba and Bolivia.¹⁴

The obvious impact of these close ties with Cuba was a strong leaning toward Cuba's own revolutionary experience during the guerrilla phase, which continued as the Sandinistas transitioned to the government of Nicaragua. This was especially true in the development of the EPS. Cuban strength was such that, following the revolution, Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos attempted to prevent the Cuban influence by using the Panamanian Defense Force to train the EPS. But the Cubans were so well entrenched that Torrijos was unable to gain a foothold.¹⁵

A Professional Army in the Cuban Mold

After the fall of Somoza in 1979, the Sandinistas spent the first two years in a concentrated effort to develop a professional army out of their former guerrilla force. They established several training schools and, by 1981, were conducting major command post exercises and field training

exercises.¹⁶ In fact, the Cubans had established a command and general staff course for Sandinista leaders in Managua. Eden Pastora (the Sandinista leader known as Commander Zero who later became a Contra) attended. He described the training as "...the tactics of war, the movement of battalions...."¹⁷

Cuban influence, which reflected strong military ties to the Soviet Union, was prevalent throughout the development of the EPS. The range of similarities went from duplicating the Cuban model of military regions to the adoption of a rank structure similar to the Cuban's.¹⁸ The organization of the EPS and its unit designation system were also taken from the Cuban army.¹⁹

As the threat from the U.S. and the Contras increased in 1983, the Sandinistas began to build their military strength to protect the revolution. Cuba played a crucial part in this development. In June 1983, Cuba sent General Arnoldo Ochoa to Nicaragua as their principal military adviser. Ochoa had seen extensive service in Angola and enjoyed a reputation as a leading military figure in Cuba. His job was to provide the Sandinistas with the benefits of his counterinsurgency experience and to assist in developing a coherent military strategy to deal with the Contras and the U.S. threat.²⁰ With him, Cuba furnished a number of veteran troops to train the EPS and the MPS with emphasis on defeating various aspects of counterrevolutionary

activity.²¹

Many of the Cuban advisers operated with the Sandinista battalions, which gave them a direct impact on the tactics of the operations in the field. Cuban trainers were also located at the major training bases such as the German Pomares Infantry School, which had ten Cuban advisers on the staff.²²

The total number of Cuban security and military advisers in Nicaragua has been a matter of some debate. The U.S. State Department had at one time claimed there were up to 3000 Cuban advisers operating in these roles.²³ However, Francis McNeil, a former U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica as well as former U.S. State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Latin America, contends these figures are badly skewed. McNeil contends that the figures on Cuban military and security advisers climbed over the years as a result of, "...a desire to make the menace seem more palpable."²⁴ He believes a more accurate figure is from 800 to 1,200 Cuban military and security trainers in Nicaragua. Above that figure are a large number of teachers, technicians, medical specialists and other civilian personnel from Cuba, which tends to help inflate the figure of "Cuban advisers." Regardless of the lower-ended figure, it is clear that the number of Cuban military and security advisers in Nicaragua is relatively high as compared to the

U.S. adviser strength in El Salvador, which is set at fifty-five. Furthermore, ex-Sandinista soldiers I have interviewed indicated that Cuban advisers were present at the battalion level in all EPS units, and this is the important "cutting edge" of the EPS.

With this arrangement, the Cubans were in a position to completely dominate Sandinista military thought from their earliest training and then influence the application of that training in field operations. This is particularly important since, in 1980, only 10 percent of the EPS was made up of former Sandinista guerrillas. Most of its manpower came from people who joined in the fight against Somoza at the end or people with no military experience at all.²⁵ Even those who had been long-term guerrillas still needed the formal training required to build a standing professional force. It is probably safe to assume that nearly the entire EPS was trained by Cubans in this process of building a new national army.

While the Cubans were primarily responsible for the tactical training of the EPS, the Soviets handled the technical side such as maintenance and new equipment training. To do this, the Soviet Union has been credited with maintaining a generally low profile in Nicaragua (less than 50 advisers by most accounts). However, it is important to note that the Soviets have dominated Cuban military thinking for many years. Either directly, or

indirectly through the Cubans, the Soviets played a major role in shaping the EPS and its tactical doctrine.

The Influence of Weapons and Equipment

Though the Soviets were less active in the field, their influence was just as significant as the Cubans'. As the EPS began to transition into a professional army, the Soviets played a major part by providing substantial military equipment to the Sandinistas.

In 1981, the first major Soviet military hardware, which included armored vehicles, arrived in Nicaragua. This equipment was principally to support the conventional Sandinista military forces around the Pacific coast, based on the threat of a U.S. invasion (discussed later in this chapter). By 1985, the Sandinistas had 110 T-55 tanks, 30 PT 76 light tanks, and over 200 additional light armored vehicles (BTR-60, BRDM, and BTR 152). Artillery included 122mm and 152mm howitzers and BM-21 multiple rocket launchers.

At the same time, there were about thirty Soviet-made helicopters in the inventory. These were primarily Mi 8/17 (HIP) models for transport and limited firepower, but six were Mi 24 (HIND-D) attack helicopters.²⁶ Within two years, at the height of the Contra military strength, the Sandinista air inventory was credited with about fifty Mi-

8/17 (HIP) and at least twelve Mi-24 (HIND-D) aircraft.²⁷

To counter a U.S. invasion as well as Contra resupply flights, the Soviets provided air defense assistance to the Sandinistas in the form of optically-sighted and radar-controlled air defense guns, SA-7 surface-to-air missiles (SAMS), and air surveillance radars.

This equipment became the backbone of the EPS. While it was primarily intended for the conventional defense of Managua, it had applications to the counterinsurgency war. In particular, the use of the helicopter became a mainstay of the EPS counterinsurgency operations. It provided fire power, high tactical mobility, and logistical support in a country of extremely limited ground lines of communication.

Cuban and Soviet technicians trained the Sandinistas in the use of the helicopter, and Cubans reportedly flew combat missions as well.²⁸ Since both nations were simultaneously learning their own lessons in the tactical employment of the helicopter in Afghanistan and Angola, many of those lessons appear to have been directly transferred to the EPS.

The helicopter is one of the most obvious examples of where the weapon system acted as a conduit for tactical doctrine to pass from the Soviet and Cuban experiences in counterinsurgency into the EPS. However, the more important issue is the aggregate effect of the massive military support to the EPS. The process of building the EPS around this equipment, and the training in how to employ it, was

simply another way in which the Soviets and Cubans influenced EPS tactical doctrine.

Two Rising Threats

While the Cubans and Soviets quickly poured in advisers and aid to help the Sandinistas consolidate the revolution, the anticipated counterrevolution was brewing in neighboring Central American nations and within Nicaragua itself.

Initially, as expected, the Contra military threat was composed of ex-Guardia personnel who had escaped Nicaragua. By November of 1980, initial Contra forces under ex-Guardia Colonel Enrique Bermudez were training in Guatemala. In early 1981, they had moved to Honduras; and by the next year the first Contra task forces moved into Nicaragua.²⁹

Simultaneously, the United States also began to provide the first military aid to the Contras.³⁰

By 1983, the Contra military forces were actively trying to establish control over geographical areas, and tactical commanders were given specific zones of operation in which they were to operate.³¹ The next year, the United States claimed the Contras had a force of between 10,000 and 15,000 men.³² Clearly, the Contras had become a major problem for the Sandinistas. Chapter 4 will describe the Contra threat in detail.

But the Contras were not the only threat with which the

Sandinistas had to contend. The United States, by funding covert operations against the Sandinistas, had made itself the Sandinista's primary adversary. U.S. military support and cooperation with Honduras, including several large scale exercises known as the "BIG PINE" series, further reinforced the Sandinista's fear of direct U.S. military intervention to destroy the Sandinista regime.³³ The U.S. invasion of Grenada (Operation "URGENT FURY") in October of 1983 created panic in Managua. Within two months trenchlines and defensive belts around the city were prevalent.

In 1987, MAJ Roger Miranda, the principal military assistant to Humberto Ortega, defected to the United States. The combination of the information provided by Miranda and Humberto Ortega's attempts at damage control through his own press releases indicated that the Sandinistas projected their armed forces to increase to 600,000 personnel (EPS, MPS, and reserve). The purpose of this extremely large force (relative to the population) was to force any U.S. direct intervention to require up to four divisions for execution--a requirement difficult for the U.S. to meet under any scenario, given global commitments.³⁴ Although it seems unlikely the Sandinistas could reach this manning figure, the likely strength of their military and security forces in 1986 was 75,000, which reflected their emphasis on a large force.³⁵

The Development of Two Sandinista Armies

The impact of two growing threats led the Sandinistas to establish, in effect, two armies. They built a heavy conventional force to protect the capitol and Pacific region against a U.S. invasion. The EPS battalions there consisted of active and reserve EPS infantry, motorized infantry, and tank forces, backed by local MPS units that were conventionally configured. The Soviet Union (and to a lesser degree Cuba) contributed substantial military equipment to this end. This force was primarily built around the static defenses of Managua.

To deal with the increasing Contra threat in the interior, the Sandinistas began to build specific counterinsurgency forces and to integrate these forces with existing political and security organs in the countryside. This counterinsurgency structure, when completed, gave the Sandinistas the capability to: operate local informant nets; execute local counterinsurgency military operations; monitor the movements of large Contra forces; and strike large Contra forces with significant combat power. The structure under which these actions took place was the military region concept.

The Sandinistas adopted the Cuban model of regional commands, each with a general staff, to handle the military problems throughout the country (see Figure 3-1).³⁶

Within each of these military regions were several subordinate EPS brigade headquarters with responsibility for administering a subordinate geographical zone of the military region (see Figure 3-2). An EPS brigade in the interior might (but usually did not) have an assigned EPS regular line battalion (as the hypothetical 1st Bde has). However, each EPS brigade did have control over at least one Batallon de Lucha Cazador (Light Hunter Battalion or BLC). These were Milicias Populares Sandinista (Popular Sandinista Militia or MPS) battalions that were drawn from the local population and operated locally in the EPS brigade's area of responsibility specifically for counterinsurgency. Occasionally, an EPS brigade had two BLCs assigned to his area (as in the case of the hypothetical 2d Bde).

Additionally, the EPS Brigade took charge of all other military (or militarized) activities in his area (as in the case of the hypothetical 5th Bde). This included other (non-BLC) MPS units on active duty and farmers in government cooperatives who were organized into an MPS unit of sorts.

The predominant active duty EPS combat units in the military regions of high Contra activity, were the Batallones de Lucha Irregular (Light Irregular Battalions, or BLI). Like the BLCs, these units were specifically trained for counterinsurgency (See Figure 3-3). However, they were the primary counterinsurgency force of the

military region commander and operated throughout the military region to which they were assigned. Originally, all of the BLIs were controlled by a single EPS headquarters, which could deploy them to any place within the country--similar to the Guardia system. The Sandinistas found this highly centralized system too cumbersome and subsequently allocated the BLIs to the two military regions with the greatest Contra threat (MR-5 and MR-6).

Employment of the BLIs became the responsibility of the military region commander, and the BLIs operated throughout the military region. Normally, the military region commander controlled their operations, but often allocated BLIs to his subordinate brigade commanders for temporary operations. The Ministry of Defense retained, and frequently exercised, the right to temporarily reallocate BLIs between military regions as required.

While both the BLI and the BLC were created to conduct counterinsurgency operations, they had slightly different primary missions and significantly different force structures. The BLC was designed to operate in a specific local geographical area within a military region. Their mission was to literally hunt and pursue small Contra forces within that area. Their constant local activity in force was designed to prevent the Contras from establishing bases in their areas. Its personnel came from that area and thus

were intimately familiar with the terrain and the local population. Since they operated locally near their homes and support base, they moved by foot and had a very limited support structure.

The BLI, with responsibility for operations all over the military region (and sometimes the country) had a larger geographical area of operation. The BLI's primary mission was to attack large Contra concentrations. This often meant extended periods away from their garrison locations. Accordingly, they were designed with significantly more combat power and sustainment capability than the BLC. Originally, the BLIs had a substantial amount of truck transport, but in later years this declined somewhat.

Since the BLI was technically a national EPS asset, its personnel came from all over Nicaragua, and normally did not enjoy a detailed knowledge of the people and terrain of the area of operations, until they had operated there for an extended time.

The first BLI appeared in 1983, and by the height of the war (1987), the Sandinistas had activated twelve.³⁷ Six were allocated to Military Region 5 and six went to Military Region 6.

In addition to these two combat forces, the Sandinistas employed a variety of small units which had missions that were similar, in some ways, to the British Special Air Service and the U.S. Special Forces. Both the EPS and the

MINT had units of this type, which specialized in long-range reconnaissance and strike type missions. The most prevalent of these was referred to as Pequeñas Unidades Fuerzas de Especialidades (Small Special Forces Units or PUFES). This was normally a five-man team, capable of uniting into a parent unit of up to about fifty men for larger operations. These units normally operated under the direct control of the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of Interior.

The final component in the Sandinista counterinsurgency structure was a political organization, which functioned partly as security apparatus, called the Comites de Defensa Sandinista (Sandinista Defense Committees--CDS). Working at the grass roots level, these political organizations not only helped implement many of the Sandinista policies, such as the literacy and vaccination campaigns, but also served as an extensive informant net. They were organized around city blocks with a representative in charge of organizing the implementation of the Sandinista's policies within the block.³⁶ Though predominantly located in urban areas, these were also present in the rural villages and on farm cooperatives and provided valuable intelligence on local Contra movements and personalities (including Contra sympathizers).

The Sandinista Counterinsurgency Machine

By 1983, the Sandinistas had rebuilt the national army and created a whole new professional infrastructure, based in large part on Cuban concepts, and equipped with Soviet hardware. This new army was structured to fight a conventional war as well as counterinsurgency. In contrast to the Guardia Nacional, the Sandinistas devoted considerable attention to permanent organizations, such as the CDS and BLCs, to prevent even an initial foothold by the Contras.

The CDS and BLCs could maintain constant pressure on Contra sympathizers and military forces throughout the countryside through local decentralized operations. The PUFES could locate large Contra forces and, with assistance from border guard units, monitor infiltration routes. As large Contra forces were identified, the BLIs could be used to conduct large-scale strikes, similar to the techniques used by the Guardia.

This counterinsurgency structure was far more extensive than the Guardia's, yet copied some of its characteristics. Moreover, the Sandinistas and Cubans expected a counterrevolution and planned accordingly by creating forces to operate at the grass roots level--a weakness in the Guardia's system.

SANDINISTA MILITARY REGIONS

(Source: DOS, *Nicaragua: Biographies A Resource Book*, 27.)

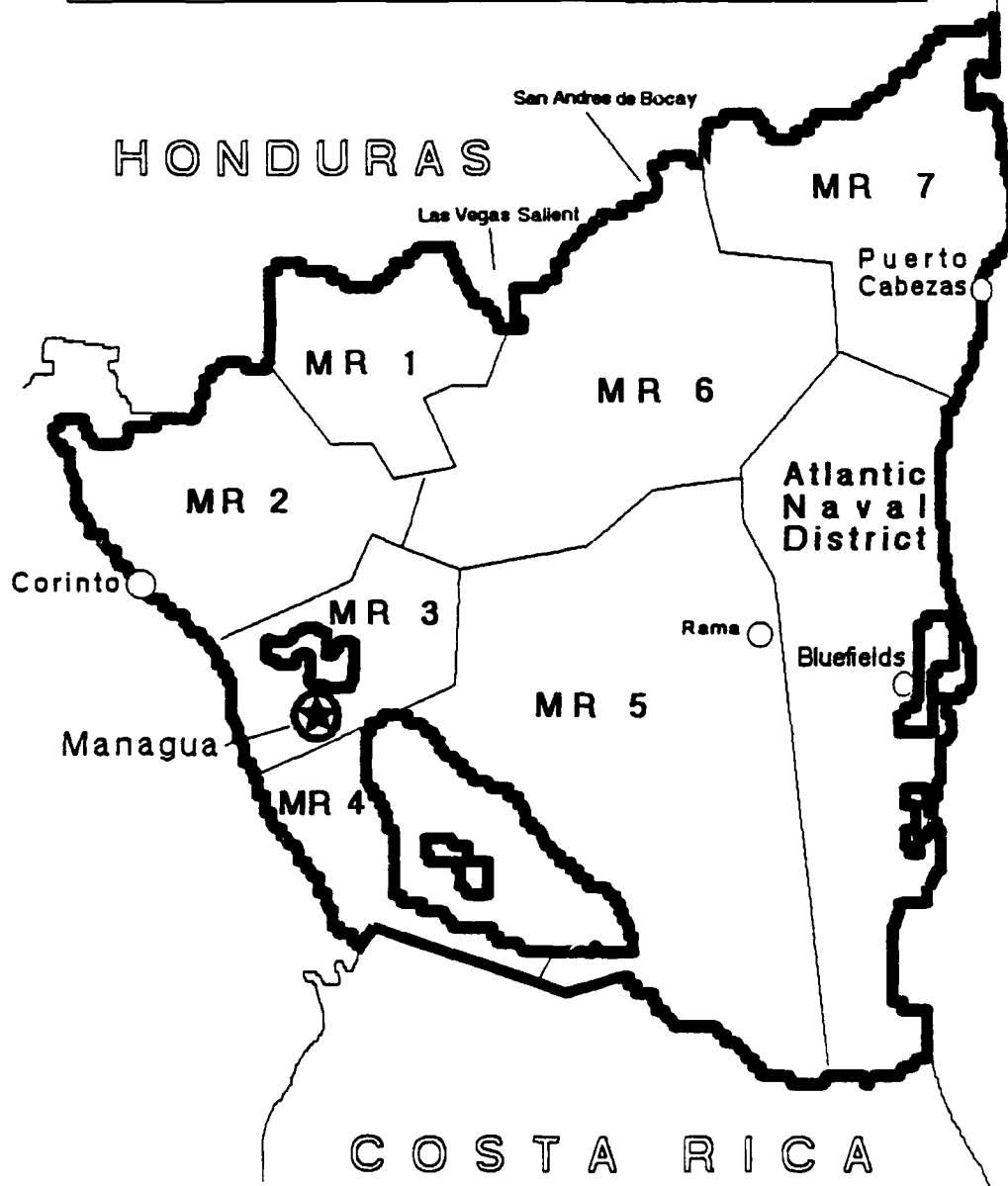


Figure 3-1

Organization of the Military Region

Note this reflects a hypothetical military region where the Contras were the primary threat. MR-2, 3, & 4 on the Pacific coast were oriented toward conventional operations.

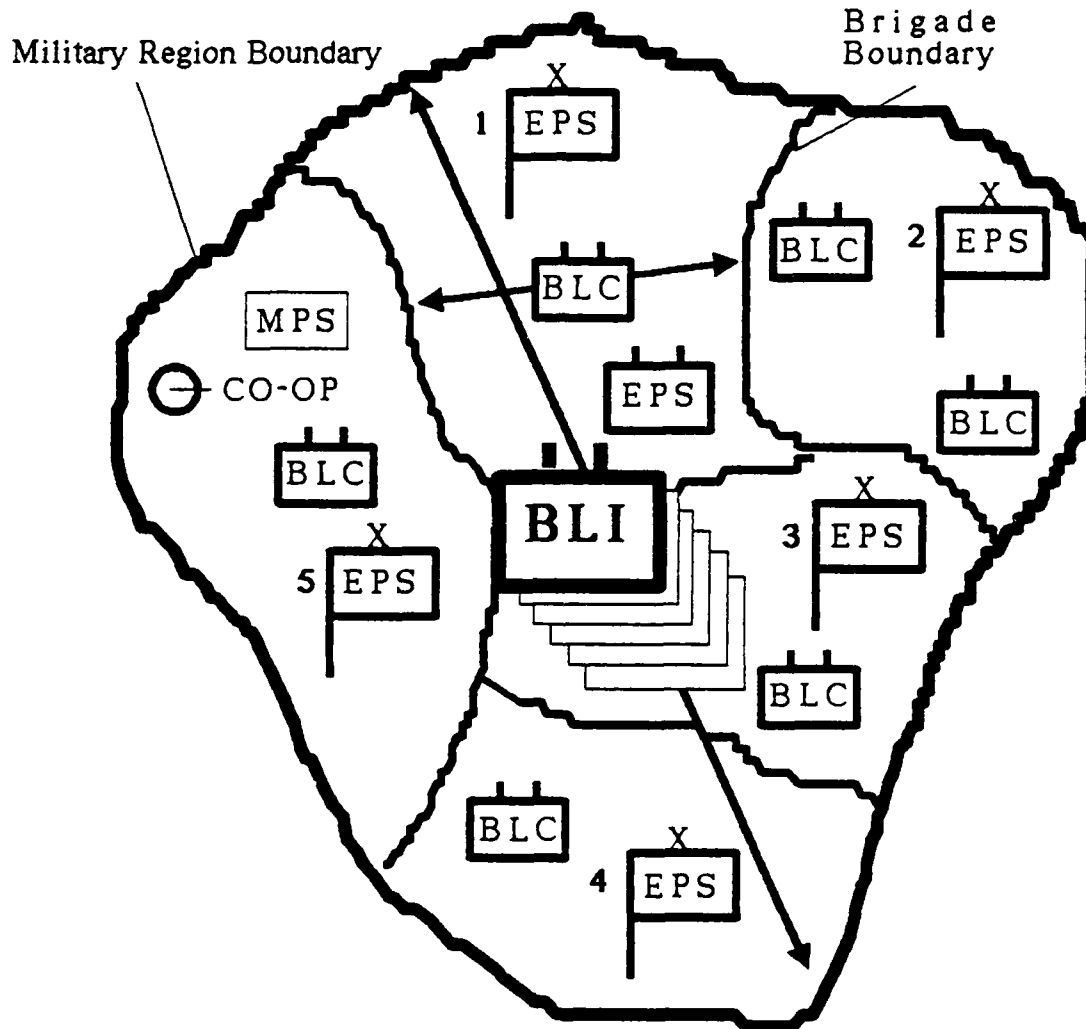
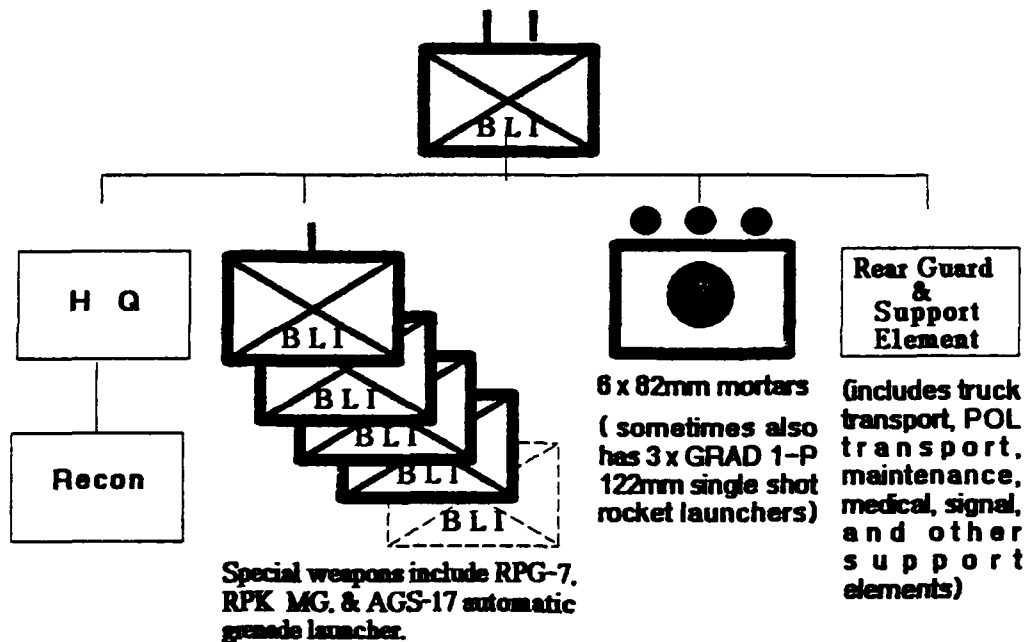


Figure 3-2

BLI Organization

Paper strength of up to 800 men, the normal strength was about 500 organized into 4-5 rifle companies, supported by mortars and substantial organic transport and sustainment elements.



BLC Organization

Strength of about 300 men, organized into three rifle companies.

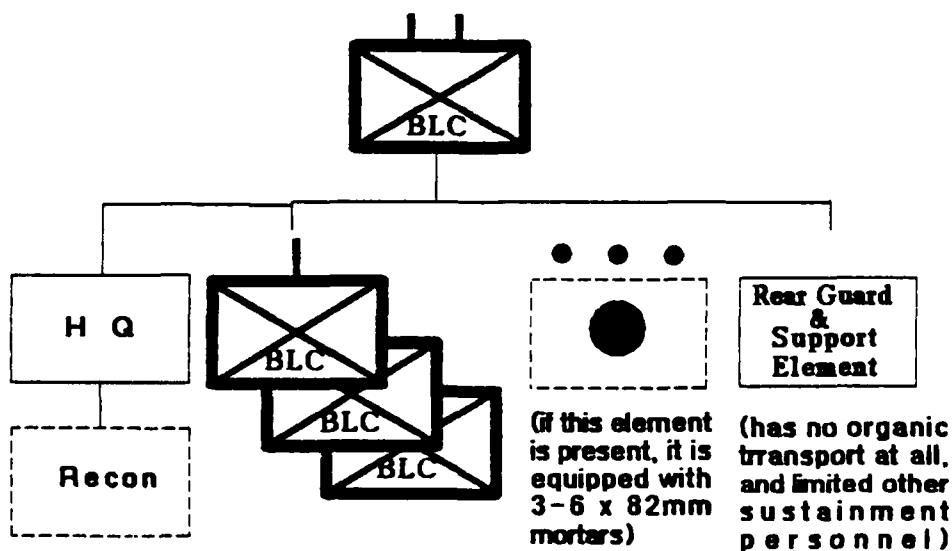


Figure 3-3

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CHAPTER 4

THE MILITARY SITUATION

Introduction

The Contra threat, the military effects of the terrain and weather, and the factor of time were all important in the development of the Sandinista's counterinsurgency tactical doctrine. The Sandinistas could not afford to ignore the effects of any of these elements. This chapter describes how these factors affected the military situation in Nicaragua, and sets the stage for a detailed examination of the Sandinista counterinsurgency tactics in Chapter 5.

Development of the Contra Forces

The Contra military forces have evolved through at least three distinct phases of development. For discussion purposes, these phases are:

- (1) the Argentine Phase (1980-1982),
- (2) the Initial U.S. Assistance Phase (1982-86), and
- (3) the Second U.S. Assistance Phase (1986-Present)

In each of these phases, the Contras progressed and matured as a military force. Though there were some failures in each, the Contras clearly improved the strength,

organization, and capabilities of their military forces over the long term.

The Argentine Phase

After the fall of Somoza, some remnants of the Guardia Nacional began to congregate under an organization known as the September 15 Legion. This was considered to be the first formal Contra military organization. Simultaneous with the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, Argentina had emerged as a major perpetrator of covert anti-communist operations in Latin America. The Argentine government saw the September 15 Legion as a surrogate force they could use to attack leftist movements in Latin America.

Contra goals centered on regaining control of Nicaragua, if not simple vengeance against the Sandinistas. For this reason, it is not clear if the Contra leadership shared the larger Argentine vision. However, in return for military support, the September 15 Legion became a temporary instrument of the Argentine government. As an illustration, Contra personnel were used to attack a radio station in Costa Rica that consistently broadcasted material attacking the Argentine government.¹

The Argentine influence on the September 15 Legion's tactics only enhanced the unfavorable reputation the Guardia Nacional had earned. When the Contras later began striking targets in Nicaragua, they employed tactics similar to those

the Argentines had used in the "Dirty War". Though the Contras knew they had to somehow gain popular support in their activities, they had an extremely limited strategy. Operating in small groups, they tried to gain credibility with the local population by assassinating specific undesirable people in the rural villages. Determining who was undesirable was a somewhat subjective procedure. Typically, a few Contras would masquerade as campesinos and walk into a village. After conferring with a few villagers, they would identify a Sandinista official or Cuban national. Once identified, they would stalk him, and murder him in some isolated area.² Targets were not restricted to Sandinista or Cuban military personnel. The Cubans had provided a number of civilians, such as school teachers and medical personnel, who all might be considered undesirable by individual villagers.

Regardless of these tactics, the Contras grew in strength. As they grew, they added to their ranks various other disaffected groups, not associated with the Guardia. Accordingly, the Contras began to form a structured military organization with a hierarchical chain of command. Their organization was based on elements of about twenty men which could unite into companies, and subsequently, task forces of 100-300 men. By 1982, they began to infiltrate into Nicaragua from Honduran base camps, in task-force size

elements.

While 1982 was a year of Contra growth, it was also a year of transition. That year, Argentina withdrew its support to the Contras because of the U.S. position on the Falkland/Malvinas War. This ended the Argentine phase and began the Initial U.S. Assistance Phase.

The Initial U.S. Assistance Phase

The Initial U.S. Assistance Phase began with a presidential finding to provide the first funding to the Contras. This phase can be generally characterized by two types of operations. First, the U.S. used small covert Contra forces in high profile special operations to strike at the Sandinista government. Examples include the attacks on the Corinto petroleum facilities and the mining of Nicaraguan harbors. While these were spectacular events, they were not the centerpiece of the Contra effort.

The other category of operations was an intensification of the guerrilla war and an expansion of popular support in north central Nicaragua. This was the result of a growing Contra propensity to field a credible military force to fight Sandinista troops. This was the centerpiece of the Contra effort. Now, instead of individual murders and bandit-like tactics, the Contras began fielding large units that struck at major targets of the Sandinista regime. Examples include the raids to disrupt the coffee harvest and

an abortive attempt to seize the city of Jalapa.³

During the Initial U.S. Assistance Phase, the Contra guerrilla strategy began to take a coherent form. It appeared to be a two-track approach. First, Contra forces would attempt to further upset the Sandinista's fragile economy by striking important economic targets. Examples include the disruption of the harvest and the destruction of physical components of the economy such as the grain storage facilities at Totogalpa.⁴ Second, (as the Sandinistas believed) the Contras would try to seize and control an area large enough to create an independent state. The Contra operation RED CHRISTMAS, which took place along the Atlantic coast in the Miskito Indian area in February, 1982, and the previously mentioned attempts to take the city of Jalapa are examples.⁵

It is not clear if the Contra leadership was serious about the idea of an independent state at this early stage of their development. The Contras were still an infant organization made up of a number of political factions with greatly differing agendas. However, it is clear that they were serious about building a military force that could challenge the Sandinistas. These relatively large-scale military actions were the result. Like the FSLN before them, and a number of other guerrilla armies, the Contras found semi-conventional warfare to be premature at this

point.

As the Contras began to establish a guerrilla strategy and expand their forces, they also tried to focus their tactics in pursuit of the strategy. They established basic infantry training facilities which trained about one hundred men per month on individual techniques, small unit operations, and leadership.⁶ "Suicida," the nom de guerre of a leading Contra field commander during this phase, described Contra tactics during this phase as conventional and guerrilla.⁷ A typical patrol moved in several columns of about twenty men each. Each column was separated by varying distances, but normally was capable of supporting the others. As previously noted, these columns could unite into larger elements when required, but most often operated as small elements, conducting ambushes against the EPS and economic targets.⁸

These improved tactics were a marked difference from the earlier emphasis on individual assassinations. The Contra's ability to unite many small patrols to form large combat forces became a significant problem for the Sandinistas as the war progressed.

The Second U.S. Assistance Phase

As a result of many political issues, not the least of which was the mining of Nicaraguan harbors, the U.S. Congress halted military aid to the Contras in August of

1984, though non-lethal aid continued until March of 1986.⁹ The resumption of U.S. military aid to the Contras in the fall of 1986 began the Second U.S. Assistance Phase. This was perhaps the most significant period in the Contra's military development. Their military structure had matured, the Sandinistas were losing popular support, and with sufficient support the Contras could substantially expand their force. More importantly, they began to come together as a political organization and to create a concrete guerrilla strategy.

The Mature Contra Guerrilla Strategy

It was during this phase that the Contras finally seemed to develop a concrete guerrilla strategy. In April of 1987, Enrique Bermudez, commander of the overall Contra military effort, described the Contra guerrilla strategy as follows:

We are going to use classic guerrilla tactics. We're going to hit the economic targets that feed the communist's war machine. We're going to occasionally mount large raids. We'll ambush the Sandinistas and attack them when we have the advantage, but we'll avoid their heavily defended military installations. With our successes and greater presence, our forces will grow. We have 18,000 men now--16,000 combatants, 2,000 who are administrative, medical, logistical or part of our air force--but we could double that. Then we'll be able to take our war to the cities.¹⁰

Bermudez further described the Contra strategy later that year:

We see the war in three stages. Phase one is to attack the military infrastructure. Successful attacks will create a better climate for our forces to operate in. The people will see that the communists are not all-powerful and join our forces in even greater numbers. Eighty percent of the people of Nicaragua hate the Sandinistas, but they are oppressed and afraid. Phase two will be the capture of large military garrisons and towns. Phase three is the final defeat of the Sandinista regime.¹¹

The Contras appear to have combined a quasi-Maoist approach with some aspects of the *foco* concept (described in Chapter 1). The strategy did not emphasize the monolithic political aspects of the Maoist model, but from a military standpoint, it did follow the familiar phases of the Maoist model. On the other hand, the Contras (and the U.S. Congress) did not have the patience to pursue these phases through the protracted warfare of the Maoist model. Furthermore, the Maoist emphasis on a totalitarian political system is not compatible with western democratic principles. Therefore, they seemed to have envisioned a fairly condensed military campaign against the Sandinistas in the *foco* style. It appears the Contras intended to continue to build popular support, but to rely on military successes to build that support. Despite these differences with the Maoist approach, it is certain the Contras now understood that an infrastructure of popular support in Nicaragua was essential to their effort. To this end, they went about creating a

military organization that would garner this support.

Organization of the Contra Military Forces

The highest level of the Contra military organization was the Strategic Command. Located in the border area of Honduras, it was headed by Enrique Bermudez and a moderate staff. Beneath the Strategic Command, the Contras divided their forces into regional commands, each with a number of subordinate task forces (see Figure 4-1).

In theory, each regional command was to conduct military operations within a permanent, pre-assigned area of Nicaragua. Men were assigned to regional commands that operated near their former homes. In many cases, the men still had friends and families in these areas. In this way, the Contras hoped to build trust and a bond with the local population in order to develop a popular support base. In practice, the regional commands often adjusted their area of operations once they arrived inside Nicaragua. In some instances, regional commands took on a nomadic existence in which they drifted well out of their designated area and often competed with other regional commands for the same territory. Despite this, the Contras developed a substantial support base.

An important factor in the Contra's ability to develop this popular support was the plurality of its support. It was no longer simply the remnants of the Guardia Nacional.

In fact, in 1987 the U.S. State Department noted that of the 147 senior military commanders in all of the various Contra factions, 49.7 percent were former civilians, 33.3 percent were former Sandinistas, and 17 percent were former Guardia Nacional personnel.¹² Clearly, the Sandinistas were losing support, and the Contras were becoming a broad-based coalition.

As in the Initial U.S. Assistance Phase, the most common practice in this phase was to operate in small patrols (or platoons) of about twenty men. For the larger operations, which the Contras executed occasionally, and aerial resupply drops, patrols would temporarily unite as a task force.

The Contra tactical handbook, Manual de Campana Para Cuadros, shows the basic Contra tactical unit as a twenty-man element (platoon), directly subordinate to a company. They were normally equipped with Soviet made small arms, which were cheaper and could use captured Sandinista ammunition. Tactical diagrams taken from the Contra handbook (Figure 4-2) show this element was equipped primarily with AK-47 assault rifles, supported by one M-60 machinegun, one RPG-7, and one 60mm mortar.¹³ In reality, there was probably significant variation in these elements. However, the diagram reflects the typical combat power of the most prevalent Contra force.

Contra Tactics and Operations

Throughout all three phases of Contra force development, platoon-size operations were a mainstay of Contra operations. As the Contras transitioned into the Second U.S. Assistance Phase, they refrained from the spectacular special operations, such as the harbor minings. Instead, they concentrated on increasing their forces in the field, conducting small unit tactics with efficiency, and occasionally conducting large-scale operations involving multiple task forces or regional commands.

Figure 4-2 shows some typical Contra tactics reflecting the strong U.S. influence. The Contra tactical handbook advocates the U.S. style wedge as the basic squad movement formation, with the column used for restrictive terrain. It also shows a number of varying ambush formations that are also commonly found in U.S. tactical manuals and handbooks. (Only examples are depicted on Figure 4-2).¹⁴ The attention given to movement formations and the details of organizing various ambushes clearly reflects the Contra's steady move toward a trained and competent military force.

In addition to ambushes, Contra small units also struck undefended economic targets as part of their stated guerrilla strategy. Typical targets included telephone or power lines. Nicaragua has little or no redundancy in

either system--particularly in the interior. Therefore, a successful attack could disrupt the entire system from the point of attack to the end of the line. These attacks impacted civilian and some military communications, as well as electric power needed for industry and public use. As a result, they were an effective means to demonstrate Contra presence and strength.

While ambushes and smaller raids such as these were common, the Contras also conducted larger raids against defended targets. Typically, the targets of these raids were EPS or MPS battalion headquarters and their logistics stores. Since farm cooperatives were militarized, they were often targets as well. Striking them could deprive the local Sandinista forces of food and equipment stored there. The Sandinistas noted that the Contras often attacked cooperatives with 100-300 men, supported by mortars and other heavy weapons--a figure that testifies to the cooperative's military importance.

Residents of one cooperative indicated that a Contra force of 250 men targeted the grain storage warehouses in their facility. Even though both sides sustained casualties, the Contras could have easily overwhelmed the thirteen militia defenders and destroyed the entire cooperative. Instead, they keyed on a specific economic target, the grain warehouse, further demonstrating a tactical linkage to their strategy.¹⁵

During the Second U.S. Assistance Phase, the Contras displayed yet another improvement in their tactical capabilities. With careful planning and execution, the Contras carried out several very large multi-task force and regional command operations that struck multiple targets in a single operation. These operations severely taxed the Sandinista forces.

In October 1987, the Contras struck with OPERATION DAVID, which was a series of mutually supporting attacks along the Rama road. Its objective was to cut the only improved highway connecting the Atlantic and Pacific coasts by destroying a key bridge. To support and intensify the impact of the main attack, the Contras also targeted other less important bridges along the road and the EPS brigade headquarters in Santo Tomas. In this operation, the Contras were able to concentrate 2,500 men from five regional commands in the same general area. The Contras failed to destroy the key bridge, but they did inflict heavy casualties on the Sandinistas and closed the road for three days. This operation was significant since it was the first time the Contras assembled a huge tactical force and used it in truly mutually supporting actions.

In December of that same year, the Contras again attempted a similar operation (OPERATION OLIVERO). They massed 7,000 men in the Las Minas area and seized three

small cities for a little over a day. While there, the Contras destroyed a major Sandinista air surveillance radar site, some military garrison facilities, the fuel storage and ground support equipment of the airfield, a brigade communications center, portions of two hydro-electric power plants and, most importantly, the military region's Class V (ammunition) storage facility.¹⁶ From a tactical standpoint, this was by far their most successful large-scale operation of the conflict.

These two major operations show that the Contras were nearing the second phase of their guerrilla strategy--the capture of large military garrisons and towns. (The phases of the Contra guerrilla strategy should not be confused with the phases of Contra military development). Despite cries in the U.S. Congress that the Contras had shown no military achievement, it is clear that they were proceeding very well, within the context of their strategy. However, this became the high-water mark of Contra military operations.

For many reasons, the Contras could not continue into the second phase of their strategy. The peace initiatives of Costa Rican President Oscar Arias led to the August 1987 peace agreement signed by the five Central American presidents. This central factor eventually led the U.S. Congress to withdraw military support to the Contras. This checked Contra force growth and made the larger operations untenable because of the significant logistics they

required.

Even with continued military support, the Contras still had not been able to use these successes to build the momentum needed to carry them into the second and third phases of their strategy. In the case of OLIVERO, the Contras achieved a major military victory over the Sandinistas. It was spectacular and got world attention, but in the long term had little effect. The Contras had no sequel to follow up or exploit success. Within a few months the Sandinistas had recovered militarily and the Contras had nothing to show for their efforts, other than a fairly significant psychological impact on the Sandinistas. However, even this advantage was negated by the loss of U.S. military funding.

From their perspective, the Sandinistas could see that they had to contend with a growing Contra military force that presented various levels of threats. The Contras could conduct small-scale ambushes and raids, unite into task forces for larger raids on Sandinista forces or facilities. Occasionally, they could unite regional commands and achieve a temporary force ratio advantage over the major EPS units in the areas, as in OLIVERO. Therefore, the Sandinistas had to design a counterinsurgency force and appropriate tactics to operate against all levels of this threat.

Military Aspects of the Area of Operations

Nicaragua is divided into three distinct geographical areas (see Figure 4-3):

- (1) the Pacific Region,
- (2) a Central Highlands,
- (3) the Atlantic Region.

The Pacific Region is the population heart of Nicaragua and contains 61 percent of its 2.7 million people according to the 1980 census. It is also the center for Nicaragua's major industries and the location of the capitol city of Managua. Only 10 percent of the population resides in the Atlantic Region, while the remaining 30 percent live in the Central Highland Region. Those living in the Atlantic Region are congregated around Bluefields and Puerto Cabezas, leaving the interior very sparsely populated.

In addition to the primary population centers in the Pacific Region, there are a number of smaller cities in the Central Highland Region that make up three secondary population centers:

- (1) the area around Matagalpa (pop. 61,300) and Esteli (pop. 26,700),
- (2) along the Rama Road cities of Boaco (pop. 20,400) and Juigalpa (pop. 18,200), and
- (3) the Las Minas area, consisting of Siuna, Bonanza, and La Rosita, each with a population of a few thousand.¹⁷

Nicaragua holds the Pacific, Central Highland, and Atlantic Regions together with only two east-west highways. The Rama Road in the south is an improved highway that transfers to river traffic at the city of Rama. In the north, the Sandinistas built a second, unimproved road through the Las Minas area to Puerto Cabezas in 1981.¹⁸ Except along these two lines of communication (LOCs), Nicaragua's interior is very remote.

With its concentrated industry, wealth, and population, the Pacific Region is the focus of all Nicaraguan activity. The Pacific coast people are ethnically different from the other areas of Nicaragua and represent the upper strata of Nicaraguan society.¹⁹ To defeat the Sandinistas, the Contras would clearly have to control this region. However, the Sandinistas enjoyed strong support in the Pacific Region. Consequently, the Contras initially had to concentrate on the Central Highland and Atlantic Regions which were under weaker Sandinista control.

The Central Highlands as a Contra Area of Operations

Because of the overwhelming dominance of the Pacific Region, Nicaraguan governments historically have paid little attention to the development of the Central Highland or Atlantic Regions. The limited road system into the region reflects this neglect. Only in the secondary population centers of the Central Highland Region and the cities of

Puerta Cabezas and Bluefields in the Atlantic Region is there significant economic development.

As a result of the social, economic, and geographical differences with the Pacific Region, the Central Highlands was a definable area that the Contras could target for the first and second phases of their guerrilla strategy. The Central Highlands attracted the Contras for four major reasons. First, it offered a relatively large population. Since the population did not have strong ties to the Pacific Region, the Contras could likely develop a popular support base there.

Second, the Contra base camps were located in the remote areas, across and along the Honduran border, and similarly along the Costa Rican border. Therefore, the natural infiltration routes into Nicaragua are into the Central Highland Region (see Figure 4-4).

Third, the Central Highland's remote and difficult mountain terrain provided security for the Contras, just as it had for the FSLN.

Finally, Nicaragua's secondary population centers located within the Central Highlands contained economic targets that were important to the Nicaraguan economy, yet difficult to defend. An example was the coffee harvest, which the Contras attacked with regularity. In addition, the infiltration routes from the Contra base camps into the

interior naturally cross the two east-west highways connecting the Pacific Region to the rest of Nicaragua. Since the primary power and telephone lines parallel these highways, the Contras could interdict the highways, telephone lines, or power lines at any number of points. Conversely, the Sandinistas had to provide almost constant security along the entire length of these routes.

All of these reasons made the Central Highland Region the principal battlefield of Nicaragua. For the Contras, securing the Central Highlands would be an essential prelude to the full transition to phase two of their guerrilla strategy and the expansion into the Pacific Region. By contrast, the Atlantic Region offered little to the Contras. The population was limited, there were fewer economic targets, and it was farther away from the ultimate area of operations--the Pacific Region.

Tactical Mobility and the Time Factor

To defend the Central Highlands, the Sandinistas were confronted with the major problem of tactical mobility. In 1984, Nicaragua had 1665 kilometers of paved roads, about 30 percent of which was the north-south Nicaraguan segment of the Pan American highway.²⁰ The remaining unpaved roads that made up the majority of Nicaragua's transportation system, have experienced significant problems during the annual rainy season (May to October). This severely

degraded the Sandinista's ability to move troops, support with logistics, or provide fire support in the field. As a practical example, a primary fire support system of the EPS was the BM-21 multiple rocket launcher. The system is truck-mounted and moves primarily on roads. Nicaragua's limited road system restricted how far the BM-21s could deploy into the Central Highlands, and thus limited the areas where the EPS could receive BM-21 fire support.

Off road movement is even more difficult than on the roads. The Central Highland Region is characterized by steep mountain slopes and thick vegetation. In the river valleys, the vegetation is similar to the overwhelming triple canopy jungles associated with Southeast Asia. A Soldier of Fortune writer who accompanied a twenty man Contra patrol in the Bocay Valley region noted that it took eleven hours to move six kilometers.²¹ This is significant since the area was near the Contra base camps in Honduras. The Contras knew the terrain, and their long-standing operations in the area had resulted in numerous foot paths throughout the valley. Even under these conditions, movement was slow and difficult.

Tactical mobility is directly related to the factor of time. Contra forces seldom presented large targets for the Sandinistas to strike. When they did, it was normally for limited periods. At the tactical level, the Sandinistas had

to field a force that could rapidly respond to fleeting Contra targets. Because the ground LOCs were so poor, the Sandinistas had two options to overcome this problem. They could position counterinsurgency forces almost everywhere in Nicaragua to reduce the distance from Contra activity. However, they did not have enough manpower to do this. The second option was to improve their tactical mobility by developing light combat forces which could easily be moved in transport helicopters.

A third option, which the Sandinistas decided upon, was a combination of these. In theory, the BLCs and other local MPS units would handle the static and territorial defenses, and the BLIs would strike deep and quickly at Contra concentrations using air mobile/air assault operations.

When the U.S. supplied the Contras with man portable surface to air missiles such as the SA-7 and Red Eye in 1986, the Sandinista's advantage over the Contras in tactical mobility diminished significantly. Although the Sandinistas continued to execute air mobile operations, they were less inclined to conduct air assault missions onto Contra occupied objectives, or to leave helicopters on station for long periods to provide fire support. For this reason, and to some extent the loss of local intelligence sources due to Contra expansion, the Sandinistas enjoyed only a marginal tactical mobility advantage over the Contras after 1986. This lack of advantage made some parts of the

Sandinista counterinsurgency tactical concepts ineffective.

The Strategic Time Factor

The strategic time factor was also important. The fear of a U.S. invasion combined with the Contra threat caused the Sandinistas to create a huge standing military force. In 1984, the EPS alone had grown to 40,000--well above the Guardia's highest cited strength of 16,000.²² On the eve of renewed U.S. military funding to the Contras in 1986, U.S. government figures assessed the combined active duty strength of all military and security forces in Nicaragua at 75,000.²³ By 1988, some sources estimated this figure to have grown to around 100,000 active duty security and military personnel.²⁴ With a total population of about three million, this is a significant number.

The Sandinistas were forced to institute a draft in 1984 to fill their ranks, and in some cases they resorted to forced impressment of youths from the poorer barrios. Boys twelve years old were known to have served in the EPS.²⁵ While the BLIs and BLCs normally got the the best available personnel and equipment, these manpower shortages affected the whole force.

With Nicaragua's economy in shambles and its manpower drained by the war, the Sandinistas could not hope to continue to field a force of this size. The Sandinista's

best hope for relief was that the U.S. Congress would not fund the Contras with more military aid in FY 1988.

When the U.S. first began military funding in 1982, the Contras developed a significant popular support base in the Central Highlands and Atlantic Regions. When this funding was halted in 1984, much of the force dissipated or withdrew into the border camps in Honduras, with only about 1,000-3,000 Contras remaining active in Nicaragua.

By 1987, with new U.S. military funding, the Contras were beginning to establish an even stronger base of support in the same areas. The Sandinistas could naturally assume the Contra ranks would drop in a similar fashion if the U.S. did not renew military funding.

In the meantime, it was essential for the Sandinistas to maintain a large presence in the interior of the country to prevent the Contras from creating a liberated zone or, as Sandinista officials feared, an independent state. If the Contras were not funded in FY 1988, the Sandinistas could draw down their ranks to deal with the reduced Contra threat. If the U.S. did renew military funding, the Sandinistas had little choice but to maintain this large force. Therefore, the strategic time factor linked to U.S. military funding had tactical impact. Psychologically, it encouraged the Sandinistas to keep large forces in the field, hoping that it would be a temporary measure. If they could maintain this force for a year or two, U.S. patience

would expend itself and political initiatives could force the U.S. to halt military funding to the Contras.

Contra Military Organization

Source: Manual de Campana Para Cuadros, 8-11, and
DOS, Nicaraguan Biography: A Resource Book, 88-91

Strategic Command

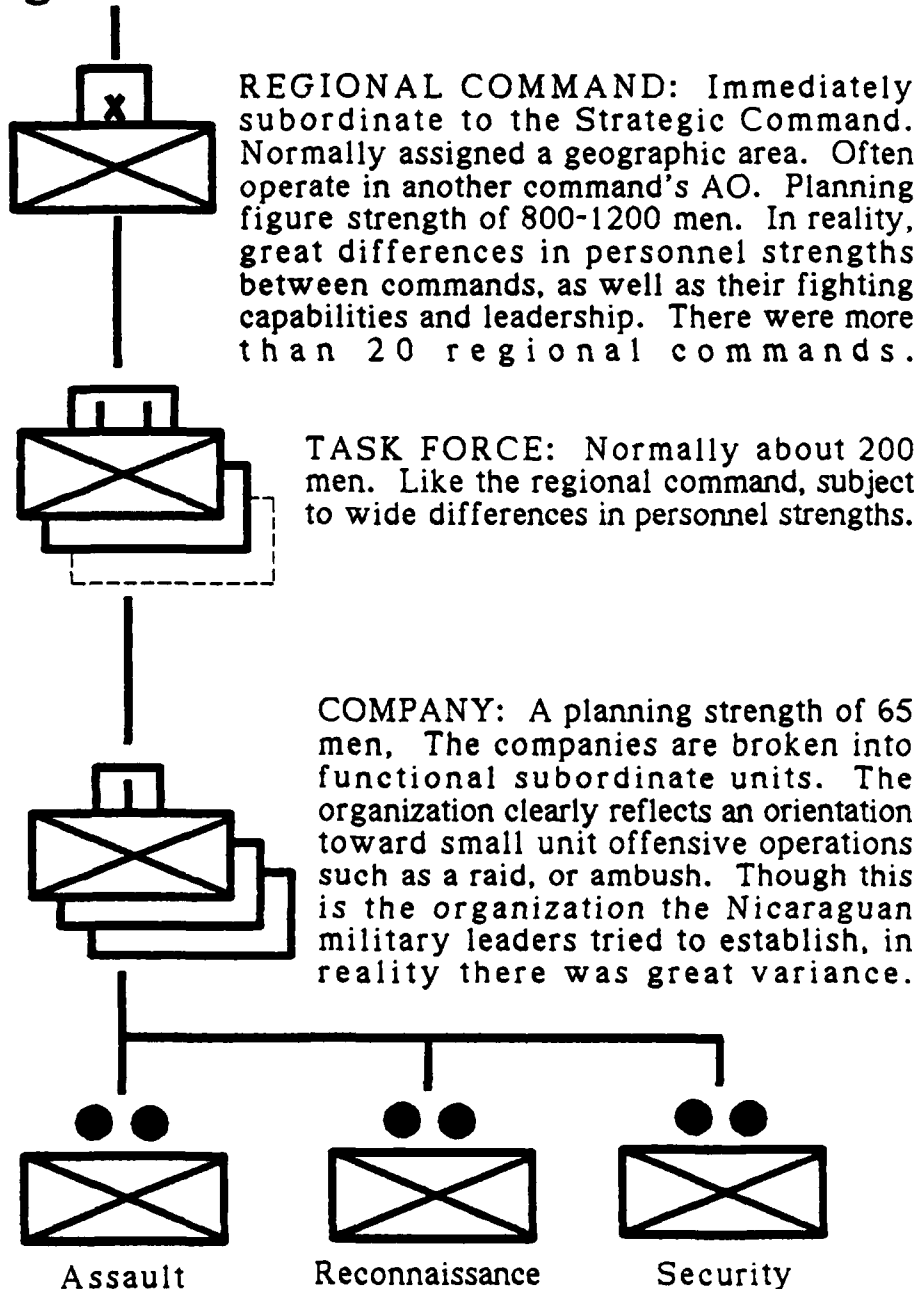
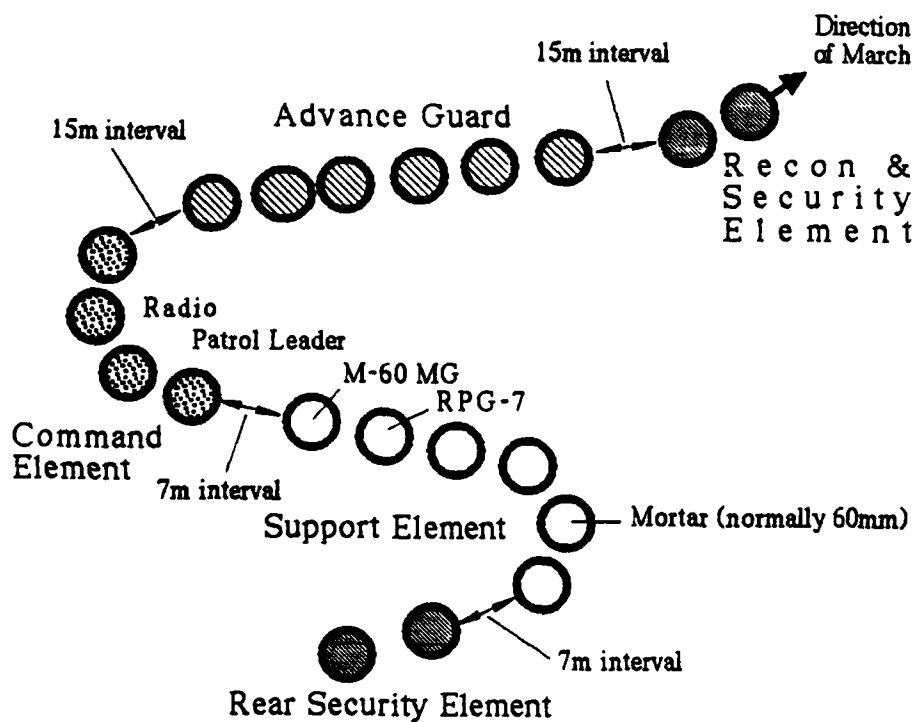


Figure 4-1

Contra Tactical Concepts

(Source: Manual de Campana Para Cuadros, p. 22-25)

1. Typical Tactical Movement



2. Contra Ambush Techniques

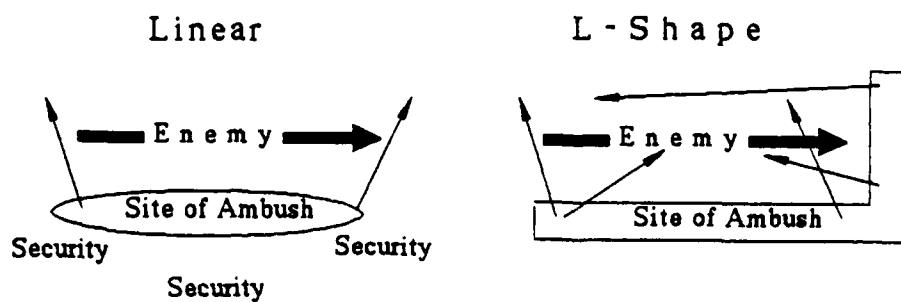


Figure 4-2



Figure 4-3

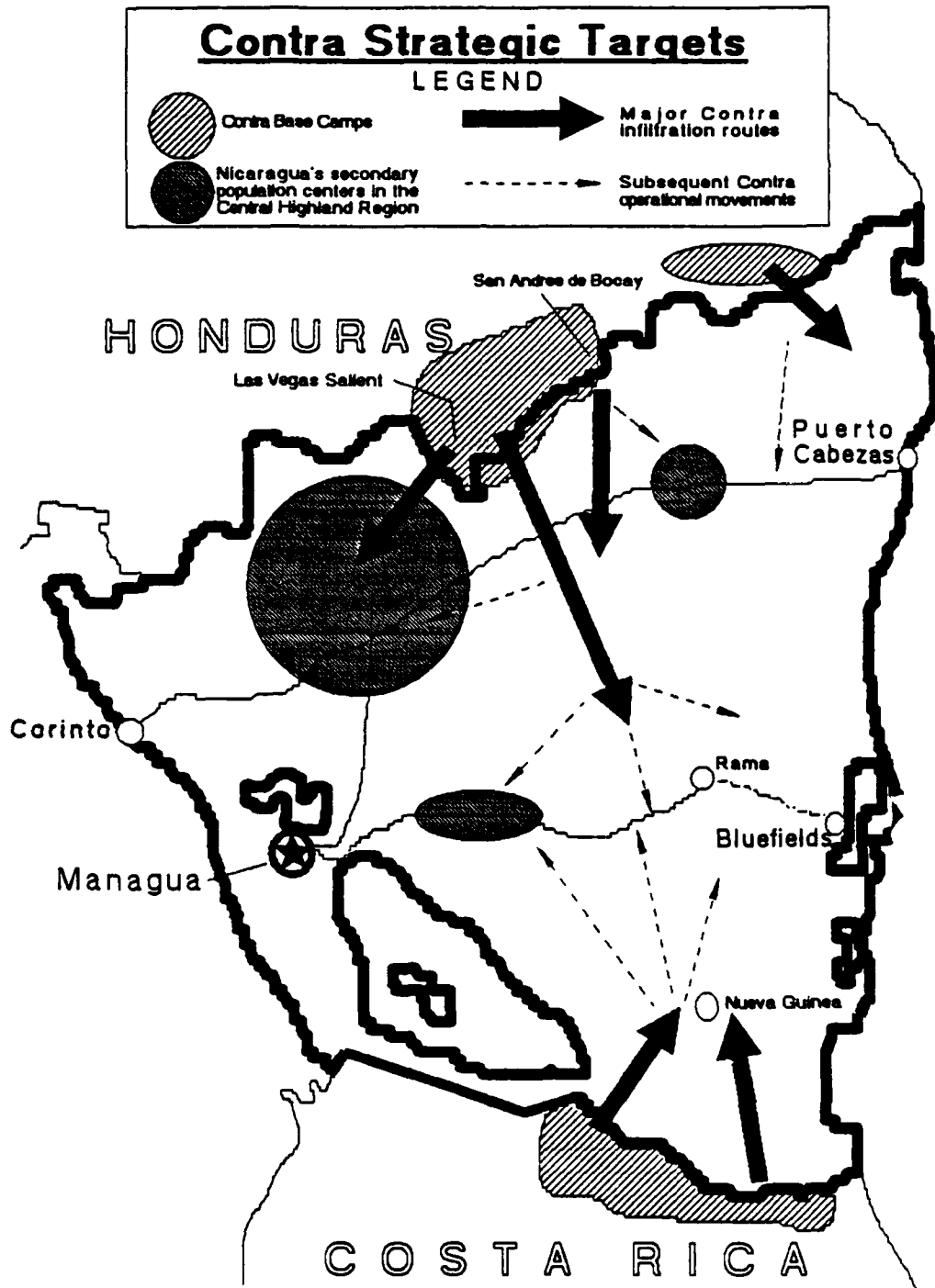


Figure 4-4

ENDNOTES, CHAPTER 4

¹Christopher Dickey, With the Contras (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 91.

²Ibid., 96.

³Ibid., 165-167.

⁴Karl Grossman, Nicaragua: America's New Vietnam? (Sag Harbor: The Permanent Press, 1984), 158.

⁵Ibid., 97, 156.

⁶H. T. Hayden, "Resistance in Nicaragua," Marine Corps Gazette, September 1988, 68.

⁷Dickey, With the Contras, 202.

⁸Ibid., 183-184, 187-188, 205.

⁹COL William Depalo, "The Military Situation in Nicaragua," Military Review, August 1986, 35.

¹⁰Steve Salisbury, "Contra Aid," Soldier of Fortune Magazine, April 1987, 41.

¹¹Gene Scroft, "War Zone Bocay: Contra Redeyes Heat up Nicaragua," Soldier of Fortune Magazine, September 1987, 100.

¹²United States Department of State, Nicaraguan Biographies: A Resource Book ([Washington, D.C.]: U.S. Department of State, Jan 1988), 89.

¹³Manual de Campana Para Cuadros (Unknown city: Privately printed, about 1986), 22-23, 48.

¹⁴Ibid., 22-23, 49-50.

¹⁵Teofilo Cabestrero, Blood of the Innocent: Victims of the Contra's War in Nicaragua (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 80-87.

¹⁶Hayden, "Resistance in Nicaragua," 69-71.

¹⁷Department of the Army, Nicaragua, a Country Study ([Washington, D.C.]: Government Printing Office, 1987), 66, 69-70; George Thomas Kurian, Encyclopedia of the Third World, Vol. II, (Guinea-Bissau to Peru), (New York: Facts on File, 1987), 1443.

¹⁸Ibid., 92.

¹⁹Ibid., 63.

²⁰Kurian, Encyclopedia of the Third World, 1449.

²¹Scroft, "War Zone Bocay: Contra Redeyes Heat up Nicaragua," 65.

²²Thomas W. Walker, ed., Nicaragua, The First Five Years (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1985), 112; Joseph Miranda, "Revolution in Latin America," Strategy and Tactics, July-August 1988, 49.

²³United States Department of State and Department of Defense, The Challenge to Democracy in Central America, ([Washington, D.C.]: U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense, June 1986), 20.

²⁴Hayden, "Resistance in Nicaragua," 64.

²⁵Kurian, Encyclopedia of the Third World, 1440.

CHAPTER 5

SANDINISTA COUNTERINSURGENCY TACTICS

Introduction

As noted in Chapter 1 (page 4), the Sandinistas considered the counterrevolution an inevitable continuation of the conflict. As a result, the means to defeat the counterrevolution were an integral part of the programs and actions the Sandinistas undertook to consolidate the revolution under their leadership. In short, the revolution would not be complete until the Sandinistas completely controlled all aspects of the Nicaraguan government and society, which included extinguishing all opposition--armed or otherwise. Accordingly, consolidating the revolution entailed broad social, political, economic, and military actions.

The Sandinistas approached the military defeat of the Contras along two tracks. The first approach focused on intense tactical operations at the local level using the BLCs and BLIs. In the second approach, the Sandinistas implemented national programs designed to complement and support these tactical operations. Combined, these two tracks sought to deny the Contras a foothold with the

Nicaraguan population and to destroy Contra forces in the field. This chapter examines the development of these two tracks and their military significance in Nicaragua.

National Programs to Support Counterinsurgency Operations

At the national level, the Sandinistas undertook two important programs to support tactical forces in the field. The first was the depopulation of areas of high Contra activity, by forcibly relocating the indigenous campesinos into resettlement locations. This program began in 1982 with the Atlantic coast Indians living along the Rio Coco.¹ Subsequently, the Sandinistas expanded this program to include large segments of the rural population in Nicaragua's interior (see Figure 5-1).

The objective of depopulating these areas was to deny the Contras a popular support base. However, a by-product of this program was the creation of areas in which all remaining inhabitants could be considered Contras. In effect, the Sandinistas could use these areas as free-fire zones. Though it is not clear if this was a specific component of the Sandinista plan, the Soviets who provided military advisers to Nicaragua had done just that in Afghanistan.²

Population control measures, including relocation, are common in counterinsurgency warfare and were an important part of the strategy in Malaysia, Vietnam, and in

Afghanistan. Its degree of success varies and is largely dependent on the culture of the people, the alternative lifestyle offered by the government, and the new location. In Nicaragua, this relocation also had an adverse military effect. Many campesinos, who had lived a highly individualistic lifestyle in the remote interior of Nicaragua, were very resistant to the move. For them, it meant loss of individual freedom. As a result, this drove many campesinos into the Contra ranks who might otherwise have remained more or less neutral. This was particularly true regarding the Indian population.

The second national program that supported counterinsurgency operations was a Sandinista version of the strategic hamlet concept. The Sandinistas placed the people they had moved from the depopulated areas into resettlement camps that were usually farm cooperatives or state-run farm collectives. They established these facilities at key locations and made them an integral part of local military operations.

Each farm cooperative (or collective) had a dual role. It was an agricultural operation and village but it was also part of the security apparatus of the local EPS brigade commander. These farms were used to store military equipment and to provide food to EPS troops. They often served as fire bases for EPS artillery or were located

adjacent to military garrisons. The farm's inhabitants were armed and expected to provide local security for the facility and to patrol locally. To insure internal security, a CDS was formed and a member of the General Directorate of State Security (DGSE), the Sandinistas security arm, was assigned to each farm. Cooperative and collective farms were, in effect, paramilitary operations.

Because of the large population involved, the Sandinistas had sufficient manpower to create almost 3,000 of these facilities. They located the majority of these in Military Regions 1, 2, and 6, which border Honduras and the Contra base camps. Figure 5-2 shows an example of the strategic placement of a small portion of these facilities along the east-west LOC connecting the Pacific Region with Puerto Cabezas. Not only did they assist in LOC security, they also acted as a security screen against Contra infiltration routes by reporting Contra movements through the area.

With these two programs, the Sandinistas hoped to isolate the Contras in the countryside, deny them popular support, and impede Contra infiltrations from their base camps into the Nicaraguan interior. Having done this, the BLCs and BLIs would hunt and destroy the Contras in the field in the tactical approach of the Sandinista's military counterinsurgency program.

General Tactical Concepts of Sandinista Counterinsurgency Operations

The counterinsurgency tactics carried out by the BLIs and BLCs, from the early 1980s and continuing to the present, are characterized by several prominent features. The overriding form of maneuver, and the central feature of these tactics, is the double envelopment. Typically, two elements attempt to establish blocking positions on the flanks and to the rear of the enemy, while one element conducts a frontal assault onto the enemy position. The Sandinistas execute the double envelopment whether conducting a deliberate attack or a movement to contact (sweep).

The execution of the deliberate attack and the movement to contact differ primarily in the movement technique. In the deliberate attack, the unit moves in a single column to a point relatively close to the objective. The column then breaks into what the Soviets call the pre-battle formation which facilitates the transition to the assault formation. The pre-battle formation is an intermediate formation between the single column and the assault formation. In the pre-battle formation, subordinate elements continue moving to the objective in three parallel columns abreast.⁴ Though the Soviets conduct these movements with tank and motorized forces, the Sandinistas move in a very similar fashion on foot.

In contrast to the deliberate attack, the Sandinistas assume the pre-battle formation almost immediately after leaving the start point in the movement to contact. This allows the unit to cover a wider frontage as it sweeps the area and a quick transition to a hasty attack if they make contact.

In planning offensive operations, the Sandinistas have tried to achieve a force ratio advantage of 2:1 over the Contra force. This figure should not be seen as a departure from conventional wisdom in comparison to the Soviet planning figure of 3:1. As the U.S. Army FM 100-2-1 notes, the Soviet figure is a "...sophisticated calculation of the total force, to include all maneuver units and combat support that a commander can bring to bear relative to the total force with which the enemy can oppose him."⁵ In the case of the Sandinistas, the planning figure refers strictly to the manpower strength of the Sandinista maneuver force in comparison to the Contra force at the objective. A 2:1 force ratio advantage in these terms is reasonable since the Sandinistas could usually apply combat multipliers through the direct fires of attack helicopters and indirect fires from BM-21s, mortars, or GRAD-1Ps. The Contras, on the other hand, could add virtually nothing to the combat power of the light guerrilla force in the field.

Like Soviet and Cuban tactical doctrine, the

Sandinistas emphasize the offensive. As a result, the Sandinista defensive doctrine for counterinsurgency units is very limited. If the Contra force is too large to effectively envelope and destroy, the Sandinistas will attempt to develop the envelopment as much as possible and wait for additional forces. Failing that, they establish a 360 degree defensive perimeter.

The helicopter plays an important role in tactical operations, providing tactical mobility, fire power, and logistics support. It has been particularly important in the movement of forces to cut off enemy escape routes--a key element of the Sandinista version of the double envelopment.

For command and control, the Sandinistas normally establish two command posts at battalion level and above. These are formed from the unit's principal staff members and their subordinates. The Sandinista military staff is organized closely along the Soviet and Cuban model. The main command post, when deployed, is normally a very mobile element made up of the commander and his principal staff members. It is, in effect, the forward command post and

travels with one of the companies in the field. As an example, a typical main command post of a BLI includes the following members:

- Battalion Commander
- Deputy Battalion Commander
- Political Officer (and assistant)
- Reports (combat intelligence) Officer
- Plans Officer
- Chief of Communications
- Radio Operator (and assistant)
- Chief of Cadre (officer's personnel actions)
- Chief of Mobilization (enlisted personnel actions)
- Chief of Weapons (maintenance and ammunition supply)
- Deputy Finance Officer
- Physician
- Cuban Advisers (up to seven)

The second command post is the Rear Guard, supervised by the Chief of the Rear Guard. The Rear Guard is the center for all sustainment operations to support the unit. When the main command post is in the field, the Rear Guard functions as the rear command post. It is manned by the deputies of the principal staff officers. In addition, the Chief of Fuels and Lubricants and the Chief of Motor Transport will normally remain at the Rear Guard since it is their base of operations. Since the BLC is a smaller organization without organic truck transport, its staff is

smaller than the BLI's.

Sandinista Parallels With Soviet Tactical Evolution

It is interesting that in the early 1980s, as the EPS was transitioning to a professional army and developing its tactical doctrine, Soviet counterinsurgency tactics were going through an evolution in Afghanistan. After two years of fighting with conventional tactics in division-size operations, the Soviets began to shift to a battalion-sized combined arms task force in 1980. They saw the battalion task force as a more efficient and streamlined counterinsurgency force. The task force consisted of three motorized infantry companies, a tank company, an artillery battery, and logistic elements. The Soviets emphasized supporting the task force with both helicopters (for transport and firepower) and fixed-wing aircraft. From the command and control perspective, this move to independent battalion operations was a major departure from the standard Soviet emphasis on large, centrally controlled units.

The mission of this battalion task force was to strike deeply into guerrilla strongholds to surround and destroy guerrilla forces. Typically, these task forces would conduct a company air mobile insertion to the rear of the objective area to seal off escape routes. The remainder of the task force would then conduct a frontal assault onto the

objective, supported by fire from helicopter gunships.⁶

While not unique to the Soviet Union, the Soviet emphasis on surrounding and destroying guerrillas has a strong historical standing in the Soviet military. General Mikhail Frunze had placed great emphasis on this technique in his tactical operations against the insurgents in Soviet Central Asia in the 1920s.⁷ The revived emphasis on this concept and the shift to battalion-size operations in Afghanistan in 1980, occurred at the same time the Soviet Union was establishing an advisory role in Nicaragua. The strong similarities in tactical concepts suggest the Soviet experience influenced Sandinista tactical development.

The predominance of Soviet tactical doctrine in Nicaragua seems to contradict the fact that Cuba took the lead in the tactical development of the EPS. However, the Cubans have historically followed the Soviet lead in tactical doctrine. In 1973, the Soviets helped the Cubans modernize their force along Soviet lines, transforming it from an island defense force to a powerful mechanized army.⁸ In conventional warfare, Cuban tactics are identical in virtually every respect to the Soviet's. They emphasize speed and firepower through the use of armor heavy units, deployed in echelon to penetrate deep into the enemy's rear.⁹

The military modernization process was simply the result of a much greater issue, which was the establishment

of Cuba as a proxy force for Soviet foreign policy. In fact, in 1975, the First Congress of the Cuban Communist Party agreed to subordinate Cuba's foreign policy to the Soviet's.¹⁰ From that point, Cuba's military doctrine and organization became inextricably tied to the Soviet's.

As an executor of Soviet foreign policy, Cuba's two most significant military experiences against insurgencies were in Angola and Ethiopia. However, in each case, the threat was largely conventional and the Cubans fought accordingly, using the Soviet tactical doctrine.¹¹ As a result, there was no reason for the Cubans to depart from the tactical doctrine they had adopted from the Soviets. Furthermore, in the case of Ethiopia, the 1,200 Cuban troops fought under the command of a Soviet general, which simply demonstrates the close Cuban and Soviet military relationship.¹² It is likely the Soviets continued in this role as the senior partner in Nicaragua, with the Cubans acting as implementers.

Tactical Operations of the BLI: The Deliberate Attack

The BLI is the premier counterinsurgency force in the EPS. It is designed to attack large Contra force concentrations of 200 men or more, normally in battalion-size operations. Organized with four or five companies, it has sufficient combat power to execute the double

envelopment and still retain a strong reserve. In many cases, the BLI will deploy with four companies and leave one company with the Rear Guard for security. In a BLI with only four assigned companies, the security force at the Rear Guard may be smaller than a company to insure the force in the field has an adequate reserve.

When Contra force locations and strengths are well developed, the BLI conducts a deliberate attack. In the deliberate attack (see Figure 5-3), the BLI marches in a battalion column to a point three to five kilometers from the objective. At that point, the companies are released and the BLI moves in the Soviet pre-battle type formation, with three company columns abreast. The command group and reserve company (or companies) follow in a single column behind the center lead company. The organization of the battalion march column is shown at Figure 5-4.

The BLI's reconnaissance platoon moves to points surrounding the objective and reports Contra activity. At 1000 meters from the objective, the three lead companies release their platoons, which begin to execute the double envelopment. The two flank companies form blocking positions and take up static firing positions along the perimeter of the objective (see Figure 5-5). They attempt to maneuver to the rear of the objective and conduct a link-up, to seal off the Contra's escape route.

The center company forms an assault line between 1000

and 400 meters from the objective. The command group, the BLI's mortars, and the reserve company follow the center company about one kilometer behind.

As the assault line moves forward, the BLI conducts preparatory fires on the objective with available indirect fire weapons. Typically, these include the BLI's 82mm mortars and the company's AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers (if within range at this point). The BLI also may be equipped with the GRAD-1P, a single tube 122mm rocket launcher. This weapon has a range of ten to eleven kilometers, but the 100+ pound rockets make it a difficult system to carry with light infantry. A typical preparatory fire consists of six to eight mortar rounds on known or suspected targets (with supplemental fires as required), six 122mm rockets, and fifty 30mm grenades from the AGS-17.

To assist in sealing off the Contra's escape, the BLI commander may deploy an additional company or the reserve by foot, truck, or helicopter to the rear of the objective along potential escape routes (see Figure 5-6). There, they will establish a series of linear ambushes designed to destroy any Contra forces that escaped the double envelopment. However, in the deliberate attack, the Sandinistas can pre-plan the movement for better synchronization.

Following the preparatory fires, the assault line moves

onto and through the objective. As the assault line presses into the objective, the flank companies in blocking positions fire at Contra targets of opportunity. To prevent firing on their own troops, the BLI uses a pre-designated physical sign to distinguish their men. An example of a technique the Sandinistas have used is to roll one shirt sleeve up and leave one down.

The assault line is organized as in Figure 5-7. All men are on line, spaced at five-to-eight meter intervals. Squad leaders position themselves in the center of the squad, with the RPG on one side and the RPK machinegun on the other, in order to control their fires. Platoon leaders follow their platoons by thirty to fifty meters. The company commander, controlling the AGS-17 (and possibly one or two mortars if attached), follows the assault line 100-200 meters behind.

Once the assault company has secured the objective, the BLI consolidates on the objective and executes the pursuit if required (see Figure 5-8). The companies remaining on the objective conduct a sector search for prisoners, weapons, equipment, and documents, etc. The BLI command group, mortar platoon, and reserve (if not already committed) move onto the objective as the BLI consolidates. Here, the BLI establishes a 360-degree perimeter and normally halts for the night.

If required, the Sandinistas will execute the pursuit

using only one company. This mission goes to the company best able to execute the pursuit. Often, this is the unit deployed to the rear of the objective in ambush positions or the reserve. In practice, the Sandinistas only pursue during daylight and normally only up to a distance of eight to ten kilometers. Since Nicaragua is divided into geographical areas of responsibility, other counterinsurgency units will assist in the pursuit by blocking Contra escape routes or assuming responsibility for the pursuit during later stages.

Tactical Operations of the BLI: The Movement to Contact

When the enemy situation is not well-developed or the Contras are only suspected of being present, the BLI conducts a movement to contact (or sweep). In the later part of the conflict, the BLIs have been used less for their original mission of attacking larger Contra forces and more for this mission. In some cases, particularly in the south, the BLIs often have operated like a BLC, conducting constant sweeping operations within a permanent area of operation.

When conducting sweeps of an area of minimal Contra activity, the BLI normally conducts independent company operations (see Figure 5-9). In this case, the BLI establishes a central base of operations and locates the Rear Guard there. They may also locate one company with the

Rear Guard for security. The main command post may locate with the Rear Guard or move with one company in the field. Companies in the field move in company columns throughout their designated area of operation in an attempt to make contact with the Contras.

If a company makes contact, it executes the double envelopment with its platoons. Companies located at the Rear Guard area have an on order mission to support any company in contact. Other companies in the field may also provide support.

When companies operate independently, the BLI commander often attaches one or two mortars to each company. The companies can request additional fire support from GRAD-1Ps, or possibly BM-21 multiple rocket launchers attached from the military region, that are located at the Rear Guard.

These operations sometimes extend over several weeks, or, as in the case of some southern BLIs, are continuous. The poor LOCs have created a heavy reliance on the helicopter for logistics support to these extended operations.

When Contra activity is high in the area, but the specific enemy situation is not well-developed, the BLI conducts a battalion-size movement to contact (see Figure 5-10). Like the deliberate attack, the BLI initially moves from its base of operations in a battalion column. However, at seven to ten kilometers from the suspected Contra

activity, or a designated terrain objective, the BLI goes into pre-battle formation. It continues to move in this mode until it either makes contact or closes on the terrain objective. Since a normal daily movement is ten kilometers, the majority of the movement is in pre-battle formation. This is in contrast to the movement for a deliberate attack, in which the majority of the movement will be in battalion column. If the BLI has not made contact and is closing on the terrain objective, it often maneuvers into assault formation at the objective as if it were executing a deliberate attack.

If any company makes contact, it attempts to overcome the Contra force through a hasty double envelopment using its platoons. Failing that, it attempts to fix the Contra force and the other companies maneuver to establish blocking positions on the flanks. The company making initial contact assumes the role of the assault company. The BLI commander may choose to commit a force to the rear of the Contra force as in the deliberate attack. Unlike the deliberate attack, there is seldom time to initiate the attack with an artillery preparation.

Tactical Operations of the BLC

While the BLI establishes various areas of operation (AO) throughout the military region (and sometimes the

country), the BLC remains in one specific area of operation. There, it is responsible for actively hunting and pursuing Contra forces in the AO with the objective of denying the Contras any respite. Conceptually, by constantly sweeping the AO, the BLCs could keep the Contras on the move, and flush out larger forces for the BLIs to destroy. With this grass roots concept, which the Guardia largely ignored, the Sandinistas hoped to keep the Contras from establishing either base camps or popular support in the AO.

The BLC uses the same tactical concept (the double envelopment) as the BLI. However, it differs slightly in execution as a result of the differences in combat power. Since the BLC has only three rifle infantry companies, as compared to the BLI's four or five, the BLC must reduce the combat power of one of its companies in order to form a reserve. Additionally, if there is a requirement to secure the Rear Guard area in force, the BLC's field strength would be further reduced.

A second point regarding execution is that, unlike the BLI, the BLC has no organic transportation. Even though their operations are local in nature, they have no advantage over the Contras in tactical mobility.

Tactical Operations of the BLC: The Deliberate Attack

Since the BLC's primary mission is to hunt and pursue the smaller Contra forces, their most common operation is

the movement to contact. However, as the war progressed, Contra activity exceeded the availability of BLIs. As a result, the Sandinistas have used BLCs for deliberate attacks on the larger Contra formations as well.

In the deliberate attack of a Contra force larger than forty men, the BLC normally attacks with the entire battalion. This is to achieve the 2:1 force ratio advantage. Figure 5-11 depicts the BLC's movement to the objective for a deliberate attack. The movement and transitions to pre-battle formation are the same as with the BLI. However, the commander normally designates a platoon from the center company as the reserve. This platoon moves with the mortar platoon and the BLC's command group. The march column is organized similarly to the BLI's (Figure 5-4), except that the command group, mortars, and reserve are located between the lead and second companies, and there are no fourth or fifth companies.

At the objective (Figure 5-12), the BLC follows the familiar pattern of establishing flank blocking positions and an assault line. However, if the BLC commander has retained a reserve, the assault line may consist of only two platoons. If the BLC has mortars or other indirect fire weapons, they initiate the attack with preparatory fires on the objective. All other actions on the objective are similar to those described for the BLI (see Figure 5-13).

In the deliberate attack of a force of less than forty men, the BLC normally uses a single company, often supported by a second (see Figure 5-14). As in the battalion-sized operation, the company moves as a column, and then transitions into pre-battle formation three to five kilometers from the objective. While the three platoon columns may be as far as 1,500 meters apart, a more typical distance is about 200-300 meters, with the minimum distance at 50 meters.

Often, if the situation is not well-developed, a second company will trail the company making the main attack in a follow and support role. Its purpose is to add combat power on the objective if required. A variation of this concept is to designate a company at the Rear Guard area as a quick reaction force to support the company in the field. This obviously depends upon the availability of transport or the proximity of the operation to the Rear Guard.

At the objective, the BLC company executes the same type of double envelopment as the BLC, only on a smaller scale. If the follow and support company is committed, the commander of the company making the main attack often assumes temporary operational control of this second company.

Tactical Operations of the BLC: The Movement to Contact

The more common mission of the BLC is the movement to contact. In areas of light Contra activity, the BLC normally uses one company in a sweep of the area while the other companies remain in the Rear Guard area (see Figure 5-15). These sweeps are oriented on terrain objectives and normally last two to three days.

When Contra activity is high, the entire BLC conducts the sweep (see Figure 5-16). The execution is the same as for a BLI with the exceptions created by the constraints in combat power and tactical mobility previously mentioned.

Shortcomings of Sandinista Tactics

There are a number of serious shortcomings in the execution of these tactics. The large battalion march column, stretching up to five kilometers in the case of the BLI, does not lend itself to the element of surprise. In practice, Contra commanders noticed that the Sandinistas, were not only easy to detect, they also tended to use the same approach routes repeatedly.¹³

A second problem is the time required to maneuver the flank companies into the blocking positions. The helicopter provides a solution, but the availability of lift aircraft with nation-wide commitments is a constraint. Moreover, the Contra's success using hand-held surface to air missiles

(SAM) has strongly mitigated against using them for close tactical operations.

The execution of the movement to contact has many of the same drawbacks as the deliberate attack. Additionally, the rugged terrain has often allowed the Contras to slip between the company columns unnoticed because of the wide separations.¹⁴

Multi-Battalion Counterinsurgency Operations Inside Nicaragua

Though the company and battalion-sized operations of the BLI and BLC have been the mainstay of the Sandinista's counterinsurgency operations, they frequently have had to conduct major multi-battalion operations in areas of high Contra activity. These have been extensive sweeping operations to clear large sectors of Nicaragua's interior.

An example of a multi-battalion sweeping operation is at Figure 5-17. This is a conceptual drawing of an operation planned by the Sandinistas in 1986.¹⁵ While the original plan uses Soviet symbology, U.S. symbology is used here for clarity. The operation took place in the area along the Rio Coco, about seventy-five kilometers southwest of the main Contra base camps in the Las Vegas Salient. This area sits astride what has been a portion of a Contra infiltration route and has been an area of high Contra activity for many years.

The Sandinista forces involved included four BLIs, two regular EPS battalions, a BLC, and one company from a third regular EPS battalion. The use of regular EPS battalions (rather than BLIs or BLCs) was unusual, but may also reflect the scale of the operation. The military region commander allocated four BLIs to this operation. The use of regular EPS battalions may have been a way to add forces while retaining some BLIs for operations elsewhere in the military region.

The operation was probably split between the two EPS brigades, with one controlling the western operation and the other controlling the eastern. The military region commander would have had overall command.

The brigade in the west undertook two mutually supporting actions. Initially, a reinforced battalion on the left conducted a modified sweep (number 1). This action consisted of two company sweeps along tributary river valleys up to the Rio Coco. Two additional companies supported these sweeps from blocking or overwatch positions. This appears to be a derivative of the doctrinal model of independent company sweeps at Figure 5-14. In this operation, rather than a follow and support role, each sweeping company was supported by a company in a static position on the flank. The location of these static companies was such that they could provide limited small arms fire support to the sweeping companies, as well as

block Contra forces on that flank.

To their right, in the western brigade's other action, a BLC conducted a sweep in doctrinal fashion (number 2). This was an extremely long movement (about twenty-five kilometers) over very difficult terrain and probably took two to three days. (However, as a young marine officer fighting against Sandino's guerrillas, LTG "Chesty" Puller was reported to have moved foot patrols an average of eighteen to twenty miles per day over the same general terrain,).¹⁶

The timing of these two operations is unclear, but it was probably planned to allow the BLC's sweep to arrive at the Rio Coco as the regular EPS battalion's operation was culminating on the left. In this way, Contra forces withdrawing eastward would be hit by the BLC from the flank or possibly trapped between the two forces.

The brigade in the east established a series of static blocking positions at key terrain points with at least two of the four BLIs (number 3). A third BLI (number 4) was also located in a static blocking position which could have supported either brigade's operation, or both. It is not clear which brigade actually controlled this BLI. Subsequently, a fourth BLI conducted a controlled sweep southward to press Contra forces into these blocking positions (number 5). Unlike the BLC sweep in the west, the

BLI sweep was controlled by a series of incremental checkpoints. These appear to have been the type of terrain objectives the Sandinistas use to orient their sweeps.

It is unclear which brigade controlled the regular EPS battalion located along the brigade boundary (number 6). Like the BLI (at number 4), its position and the specific terrain location allowed it to support either operation.

Within the context of this conflict, one key point can be seen in this operation. As the Contra military threat grew, it became clear that a single BLC or BLI could not always handle the mission. This plan shows the Sandinista's ability to organize a coordinated operation involving several battalions working in concert. Here, the Sandinistas demonstrated a command and control mechanism above battalion level to deal with the growing Contra operations.

Punitive Raids Against Contra Activity Inside Honduras and Along the Border

A second category of multi-battalion counterinsurgency operations conducted by the Sandinistas were periodic raids into the Honduran border area where Contra base camps were located. Because of the forces and support required, the Sandinistas only undertook two or three of these raids in a year. The possible aims of these raids were to:

- (1) threaten Contra base camps

- (2) divert Contra forces to the defense of the camps
- (3) disrupt Contra logistics and infiltration routes
- (4) psychologically threaten the Contra leadership
- (5) point out Contra use of Honduras as a sanctuary

The Contra base camps in the Las Vegas Salient were the primary targets of these Sandinista raids until 1987. At that time, the Honduran government asked the Contras to move the bulk of their bases to the area around San Andres de Bocay.¹⁷ With the Contra relocation, the Bocay valley, which extended southward into Nicaragua, became the primary Contra infiltration route into Nicaragua. Accordingly, the Sandinistas shifted their attention to this new area and began to conduct large sweeping operations in the Bocay valley. The Sandinista's focus for cross-border raids shifted to San Andres de Bocay as well.

An example of this type of raid was the March 1988 attack at San Andres de Bocay (see Figure 5-18). The Contra's logistical base inside Honduras actually consisted of several locations, including supply storage areas, medical facilities, and a dirt airstrip on the Honduran side of the border for resupply drops by the Contra's aircraft. These camps were dispersed throughout the area and extended well into Honduras.¹⁸ The surrounding terrain is mountainous with thick vegetation that contributed to the security of the camps.

Because the raid involved cross-border operations, it

was controlled at the highest level, rather than by the military region commander of the adjacent area. Daniel Ortega was personally involved in the decision to attack, and the overall military commander was Lieutenant Colonel Javier Carrion--the Deputy Chief of Staff of the EPS.¹⁹

The Sandinista's first step was to conduct a reconnaissance of the target area (probably with PUFES) while concurrently establishing a forward logistical and troop staging base at Bonanza, in the Las Minas area.²⁰

Once the target had been developed and the logistics system was in place, the Sandinistas began a six-battalion pincer action designed to converge on the Contra camps. One pincer moved north along the Bocay River valley by foot. Its mission was to drive north along the valley, preventing Contra forces in the valley from supporting the base camps.

The second pincer began as an air mobile from Bonanza to Nicaraguan territory north of the base camps. From there, the Sandinistas drove south into Honduras to strike at the main Contra complex.²¹ Meanwhile, the southern pincer attacked across the border from the opposite direction.

The difficulty of the terrain and political considerations made this operation only a marginal tactical success. As in the past, the dense jungle and mountains allowed Contra forces in the Bocay valley easily to avoid

the sweep from the south. At the objective area, the Sandinistas were reported to have gone up to five miles inside Honduras, but they were unable to destroy major Contra forces and stopped short of seizing the main Contra logistics stocks. The operation reached a political "culminating point" when the U.S. deployed combat forces to Honduras as a show of force, and the Honduran government reacted to the border violation with an air strike on Sandinista forces.²² Nevertheless, the Sandinistas repeatedly demonstrated their ability to project combat power in strength through this operation and several other similar raids.

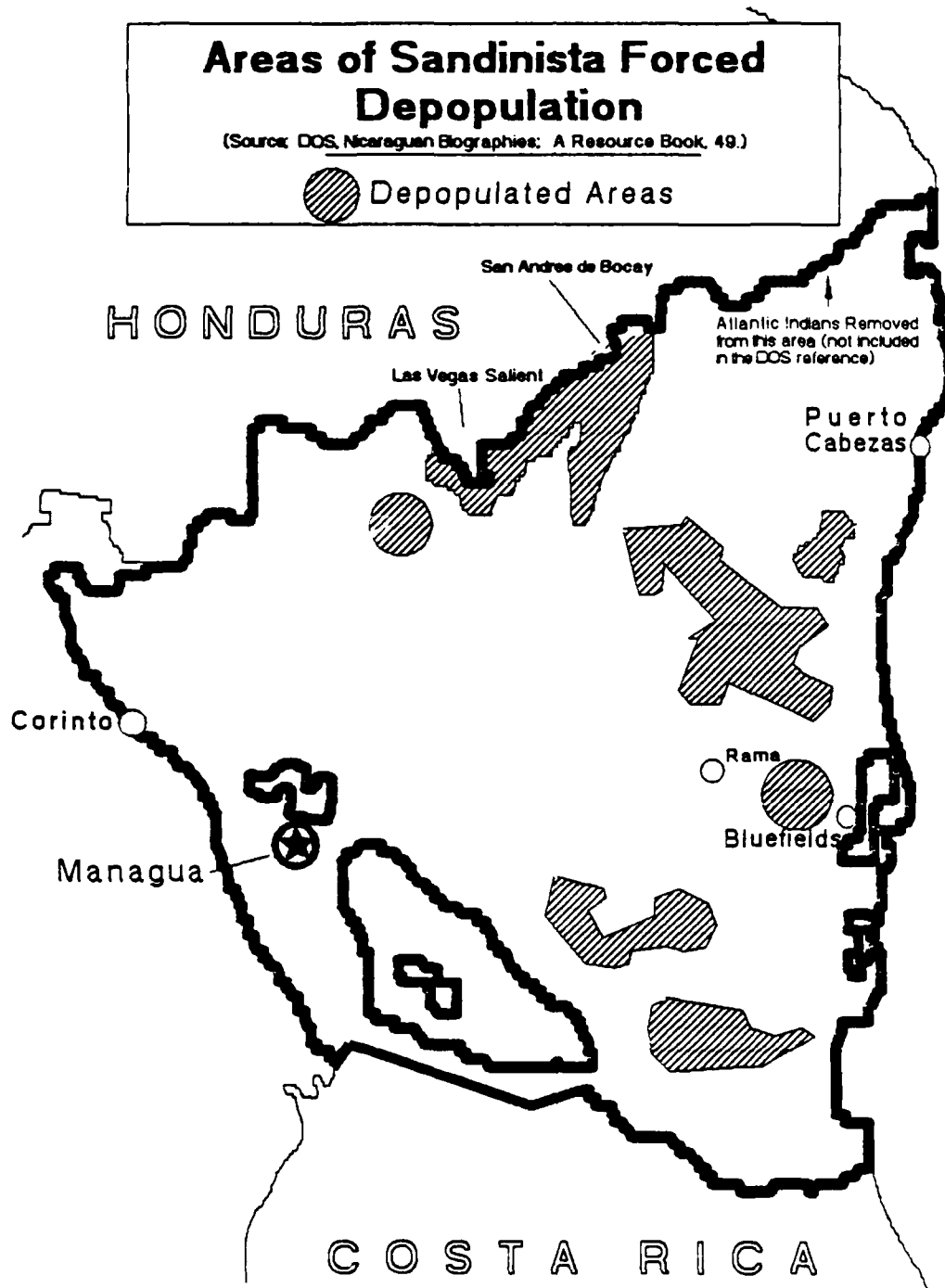


Figure 5-1

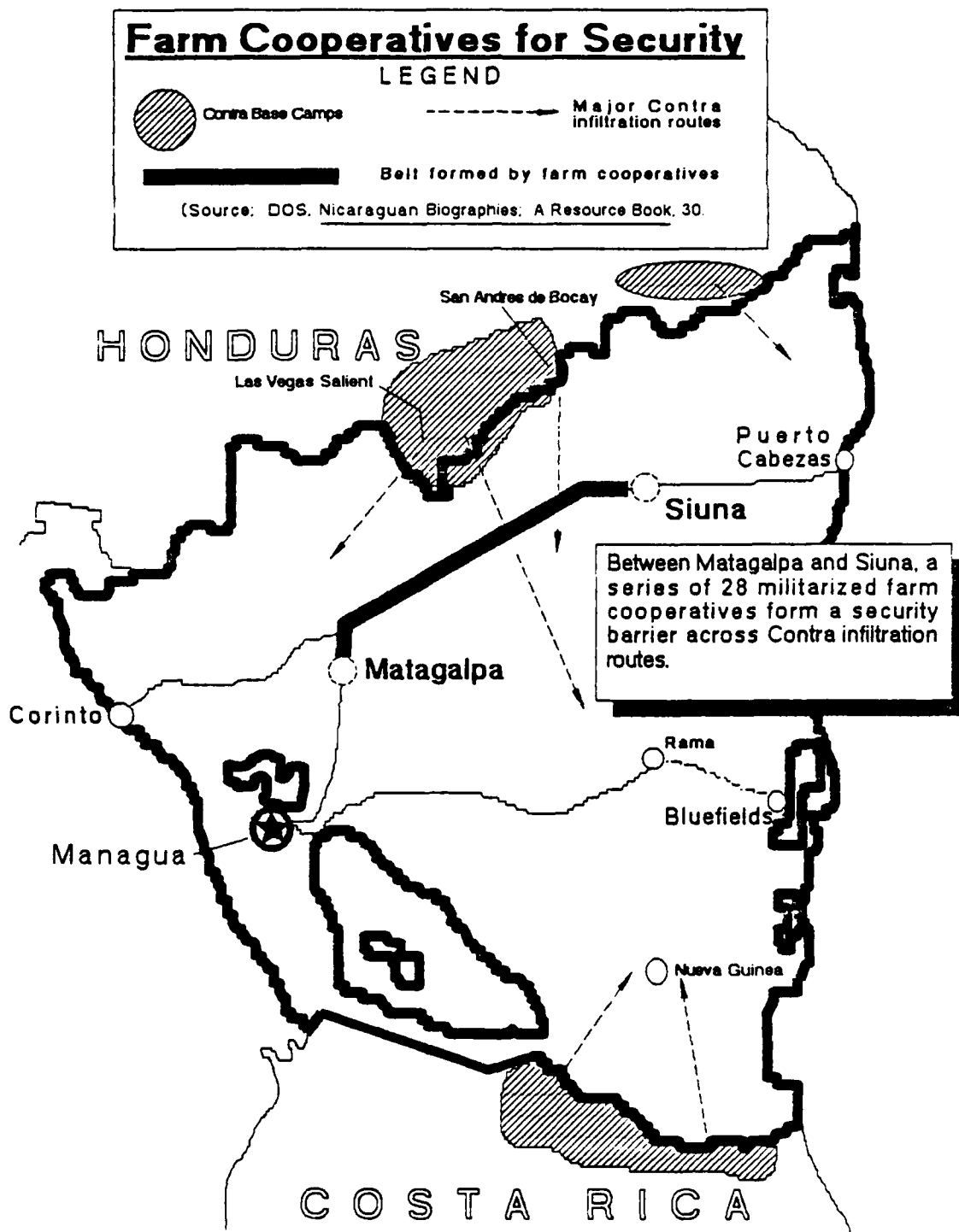


Figure 5-2

BLI (Battalion Operation): Battalion Movement to the Objective for a Deliberate Attack.

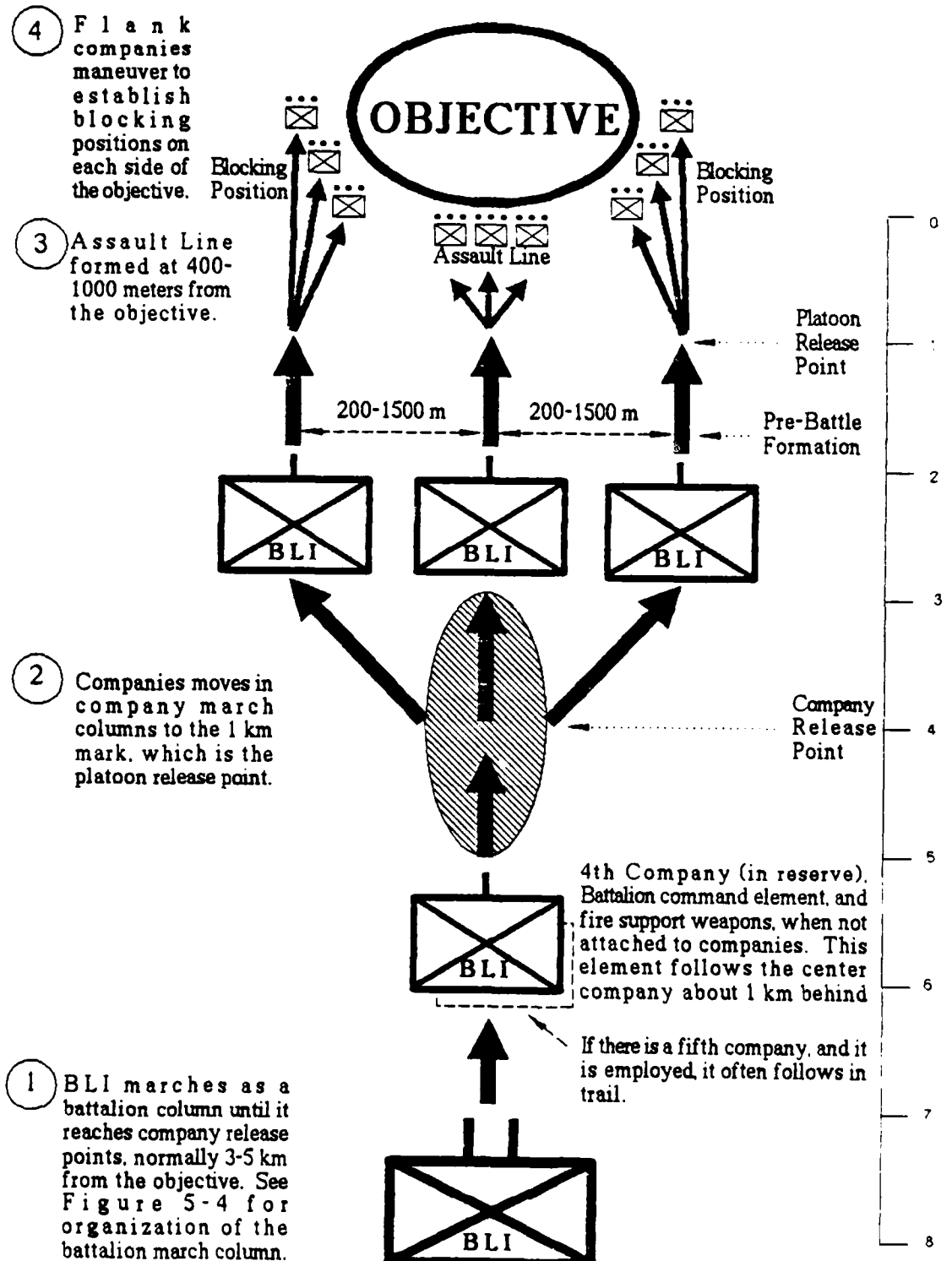


Figure 5-3

BLI in March Column

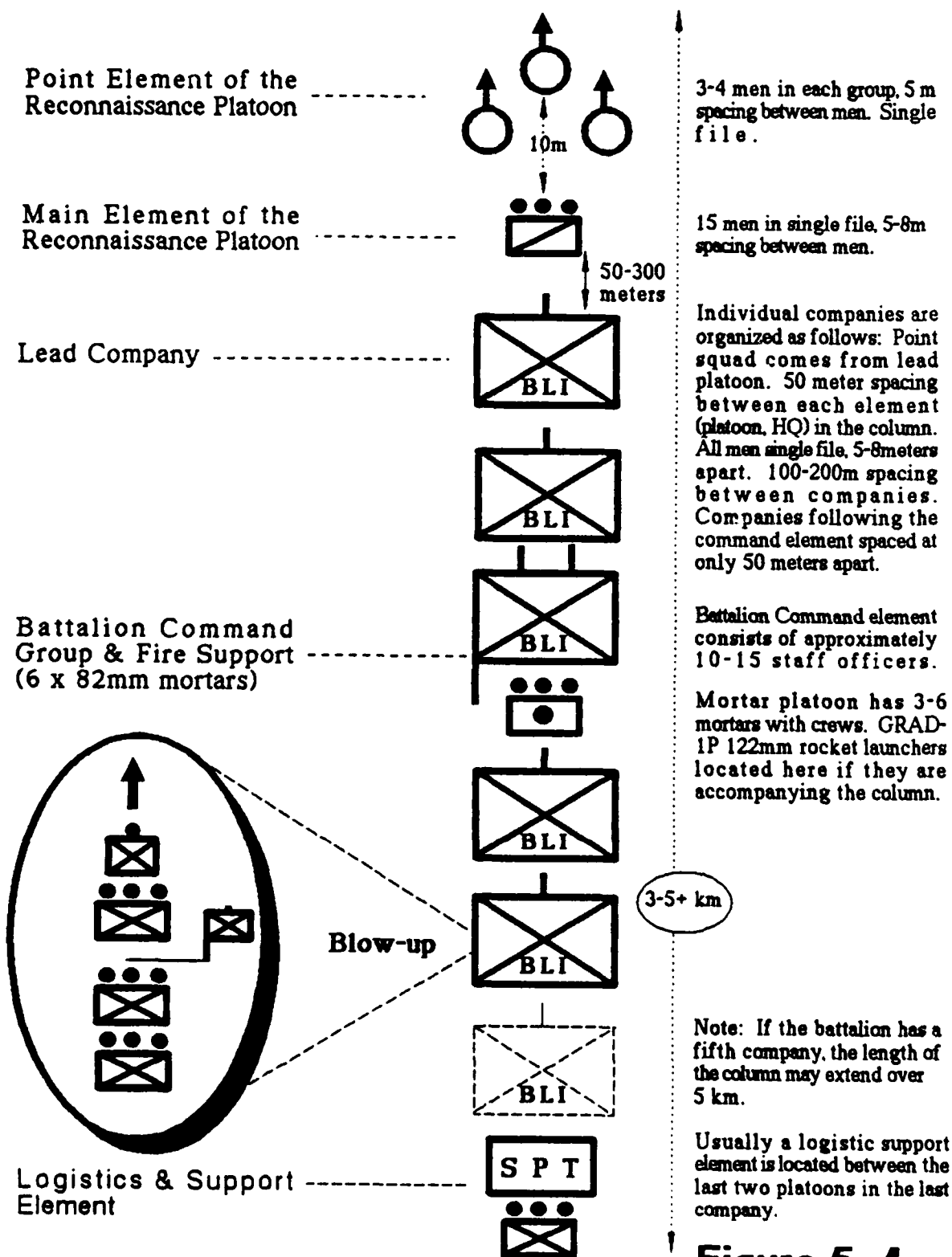


Figure 5-4

BLI (Battalion Operation): Actions on the Objective in a Deliberate Attack

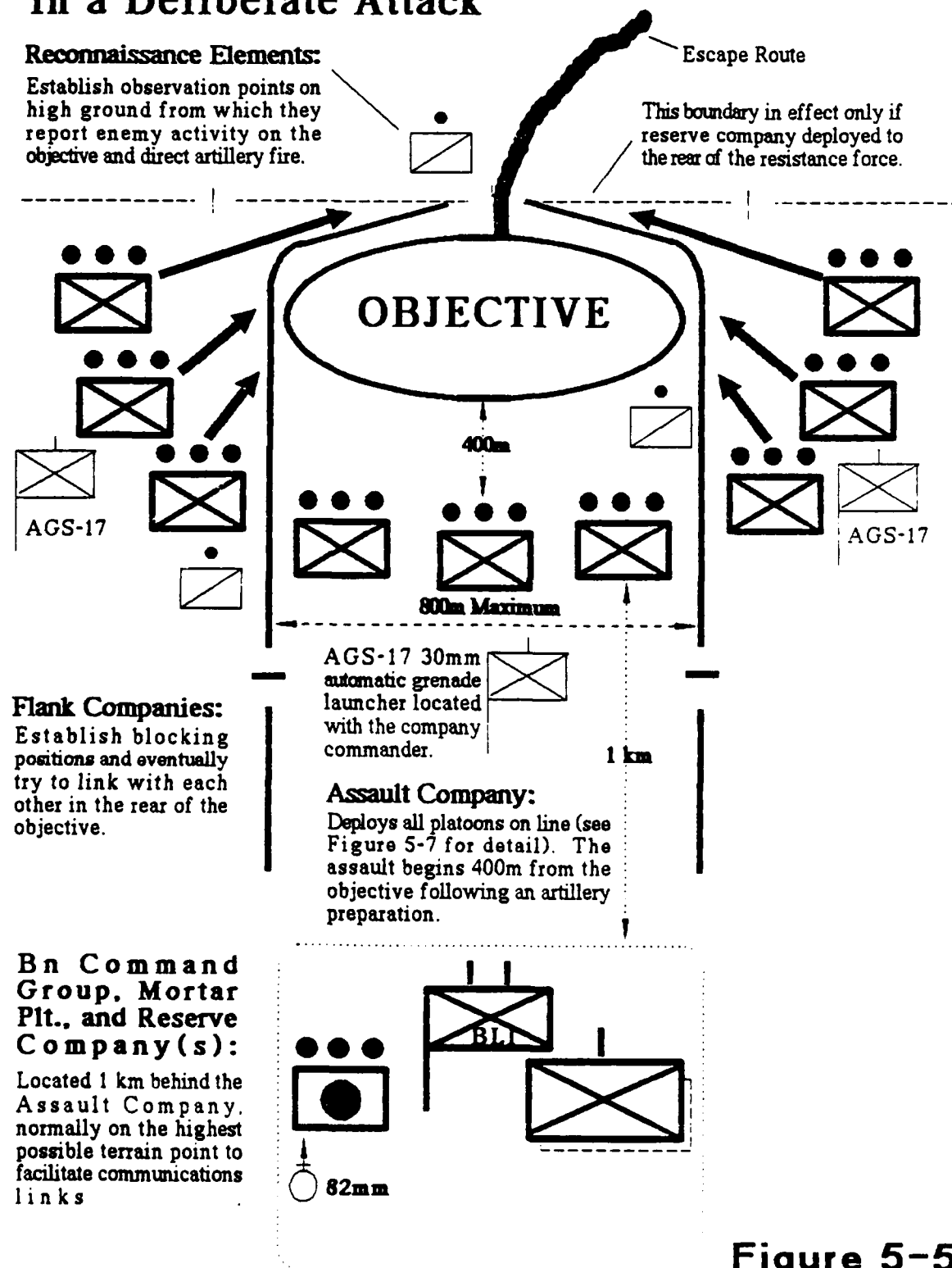
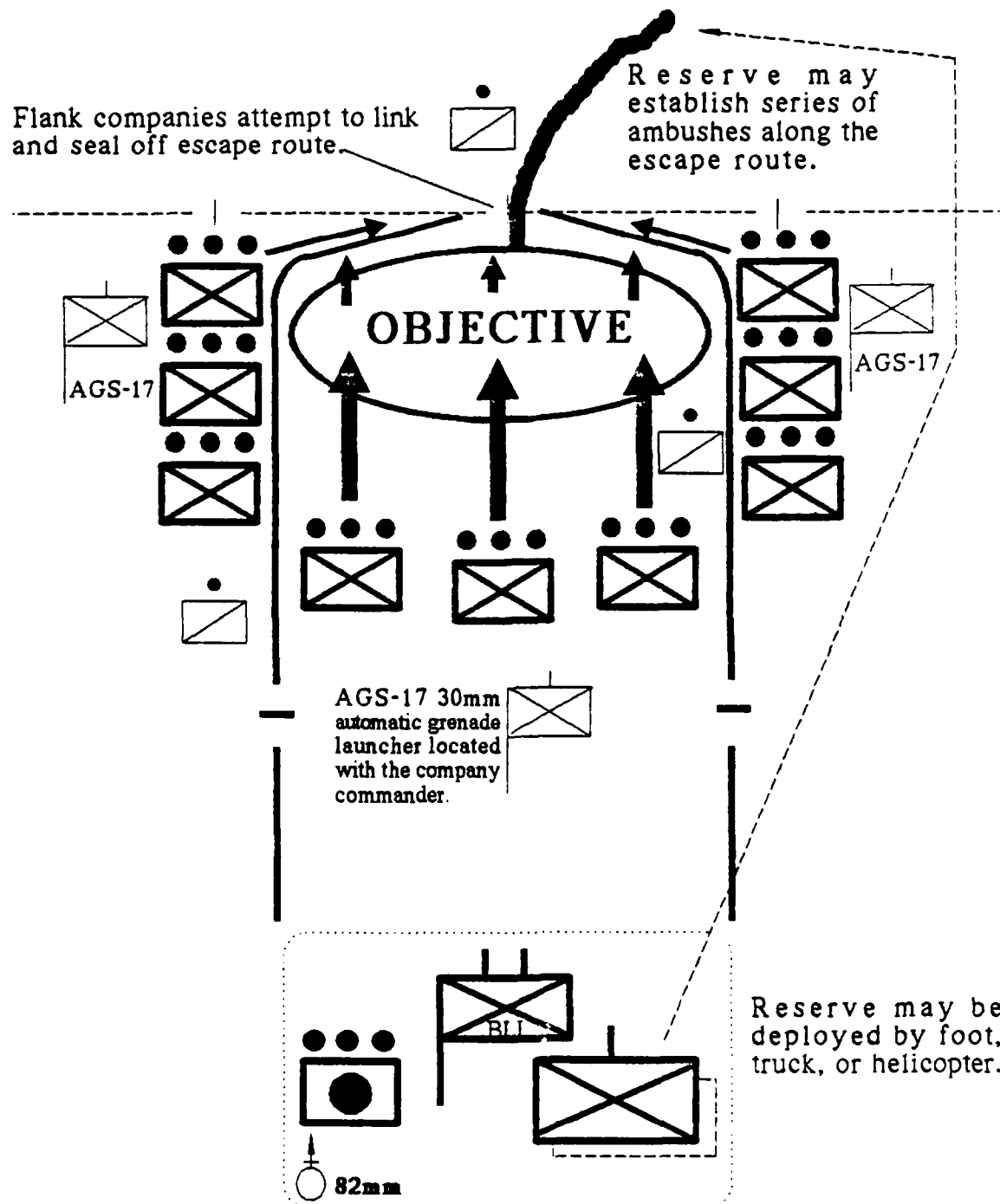


Figure 5-5

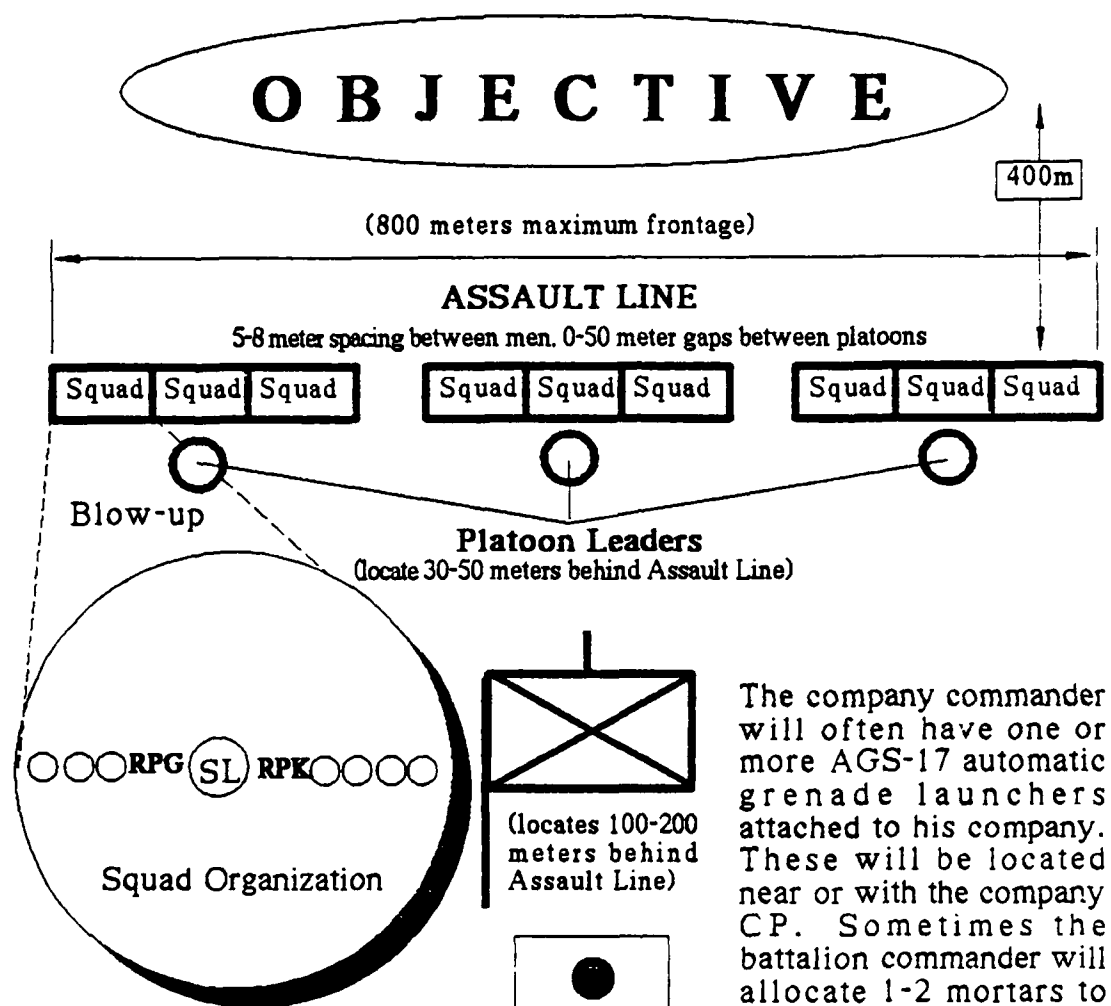
BLI (Battalion Operation): Actions on the Objective in a Deliberate Attack, Use of the Reserve



Assault begins with mortar/ GRAD-1P/AGS-17 prep. Assault company sweeps through objective. Flank companies take up blocking positions and fire at targets of opportunity.

Figure 5-6

Organization of the Assault Line (Company)



The Squad is organized for assault with all men on line. The Squad Leader (SL) is centered with the RPG gunner to the left and the RPK gunner to the right. This is to allow the SL to personally direct the fire of these two weapons. All other members of the squad carry the AK-47 assault rifle.

The company commander will often have one or more AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers attached to his company. These will be located near or with the company CP. Sometimes the battalion commander will allocate 1-2 mortars to his companies, which will also locate near the company CP.

The Assault Line moves forward together following the artillery prep. This artillery prep normally begins when the Assault Line is about 400m from the objective.

Figure 5-7

BLI Deliberate Attack: Actions on the Objective, Consolidation and Pursuit.

Assault & Blocking Companies

Companies committed at the objective conduct a sector search for prisoners, weapons, documents, etc., and then establish a 360 degree perimeter.

Pursuit Company

BLIs normally pursue with only one company. Pursue only in day, and usually not more than 8-10km. This is normally the reserve company.

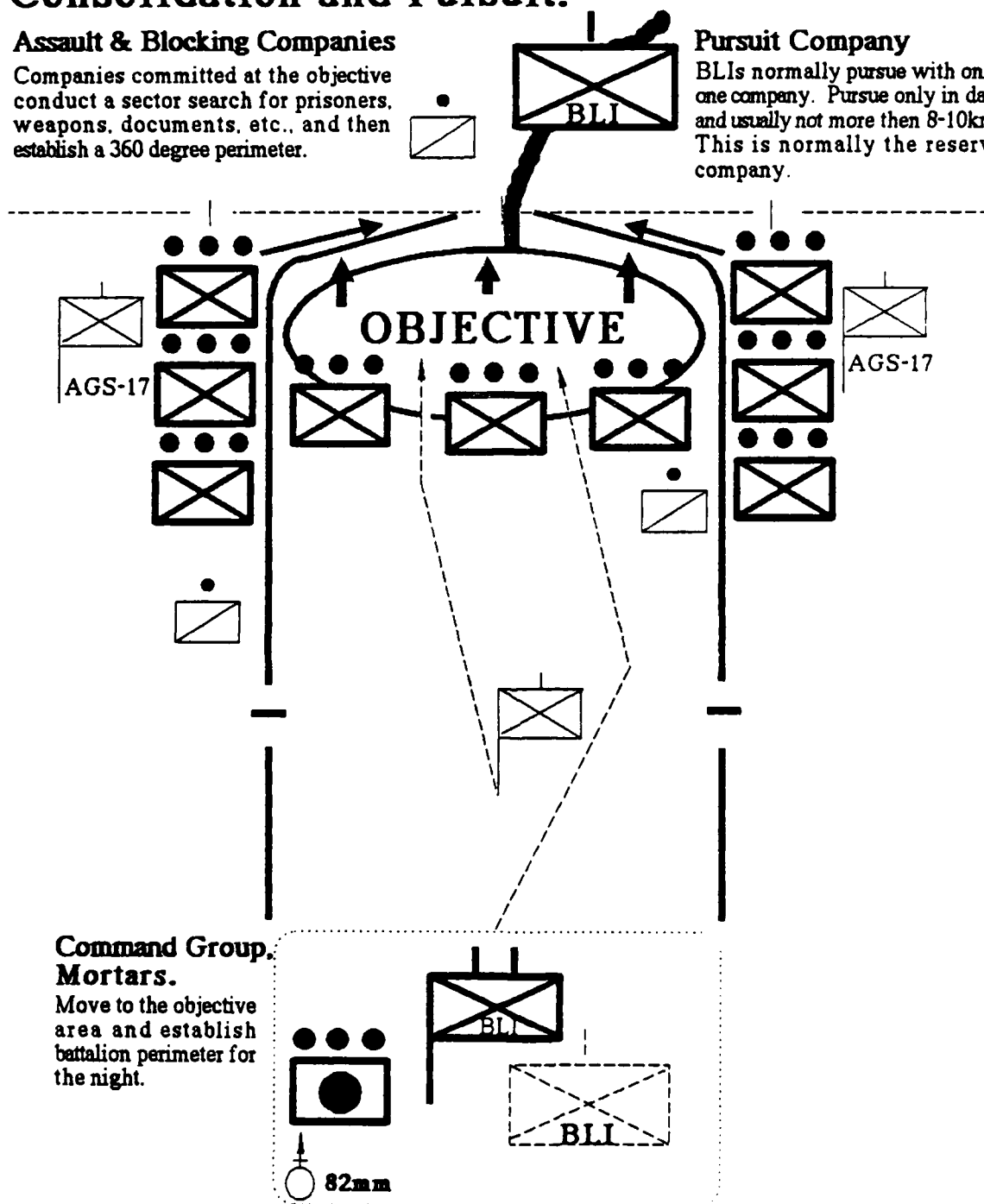
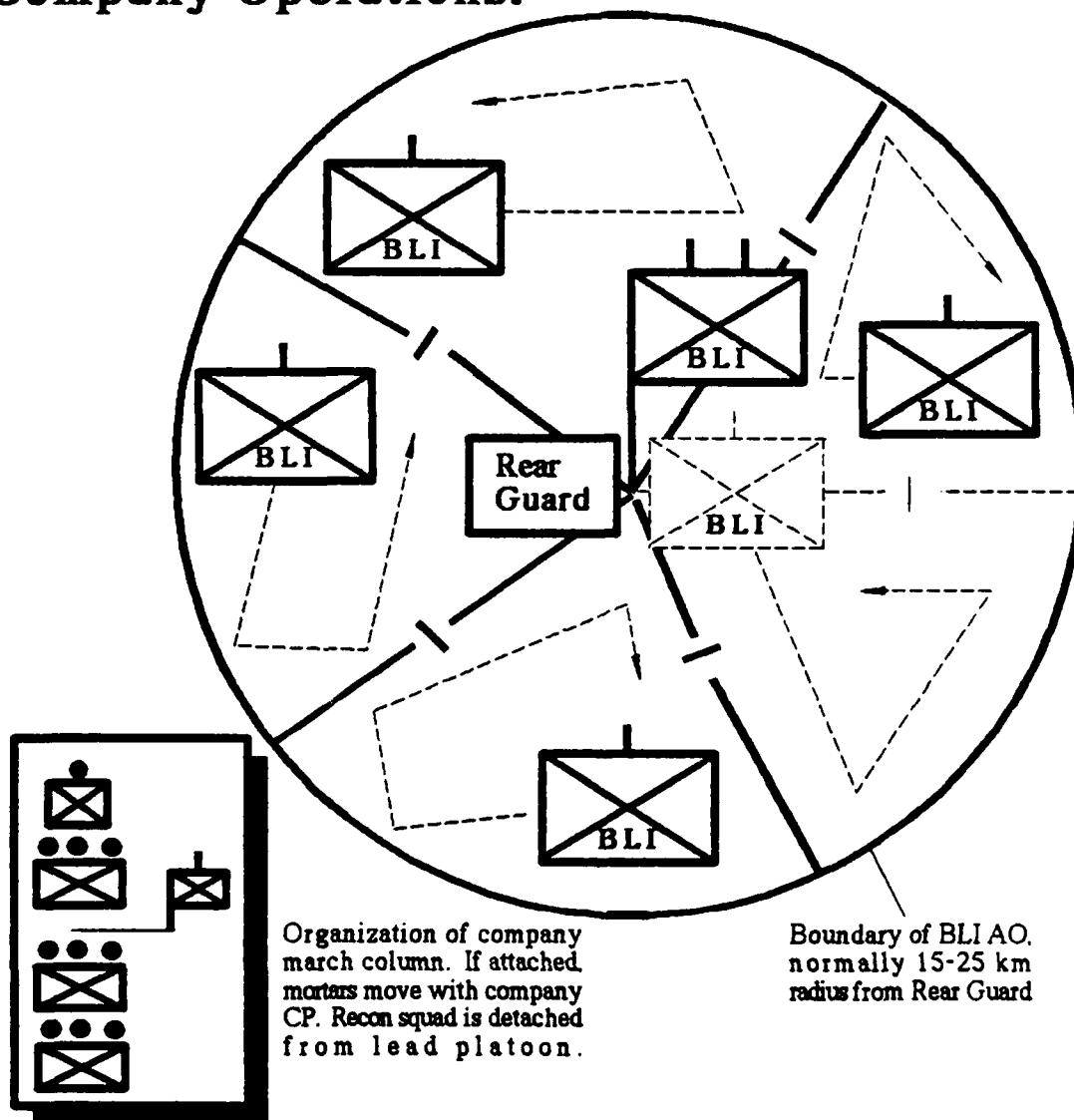


Figure 5-8

BLI: Movement to Contact (Sweep), Independent Company Operations.



When operating in independent company sweeps, the battalion's operation centers on the Rear Guard, which is the logistics, administrative, and communications center for the battalion. The Rear Guard may also serve as the location of the battalion's fire support (mortars, GRAD-1P, or attached BM-21). A reserve company is often located with the Rear Guard to provide security or to act as a quick reaction force. However, it is also common for all companies to be deployed at once. In many cases these companies operate for extended periods in the field, resupplied by helicopter. Otherwise, they conduct short duration missions from the battalion Rear Guard area.

Figure 5-9

2 If any company makes contact with the Contras, the battalion commander maneuvers the companies to execute the same tactics, at the point of contact, as on the objective in a deliberate attack (See Fig. 5-5, 5-6, 5-7, and 5-8). If there is no contact, the company columns close on a terrain objective, and may actually maneuver into assault positions before moving on to the objective.

1 Companies march as company columns beginning 7-10km from the objective. The recon platoon may operate as a single element, well ahead of the main body, or as squads in advance of each company column.

On command element, the mortar platoon, and reserve company(s) follow the center company at 1-5km. The mortars are attached to each company if widely separated.

① Companies march as company columns beginning 7-10km from the objective. The recon platoon may operate as a single element, well ahead of the main body, or as squads in advance of each company column.

Scale in
kilometers

BLC (Bn Operation): Deliberate Attack, Movement to Objective. (When Contra Force is More Than 40 Men)

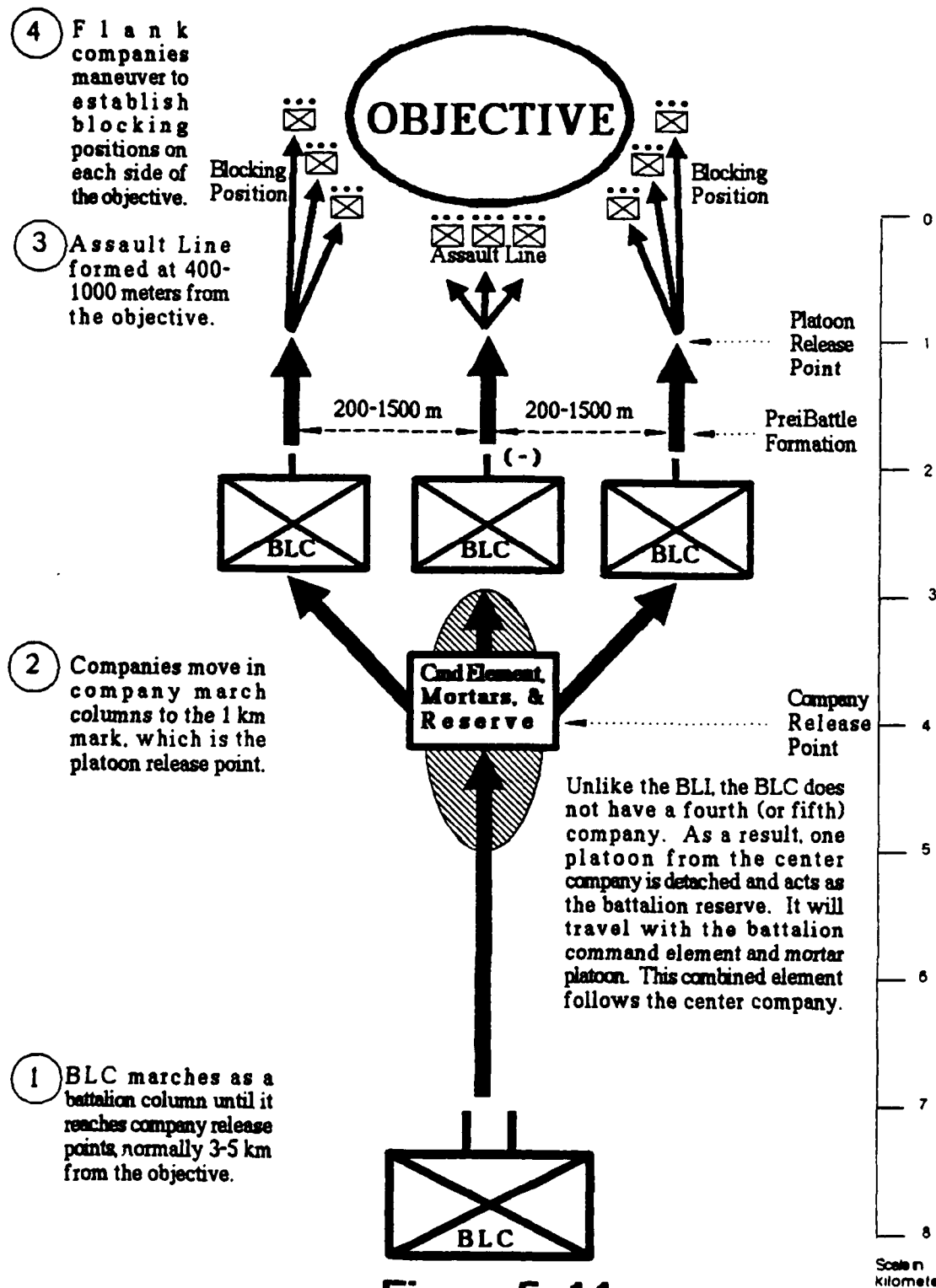


Figure 5-11

BLC (Battalion Operation): Actions on the Objective in a Deliberate Attack

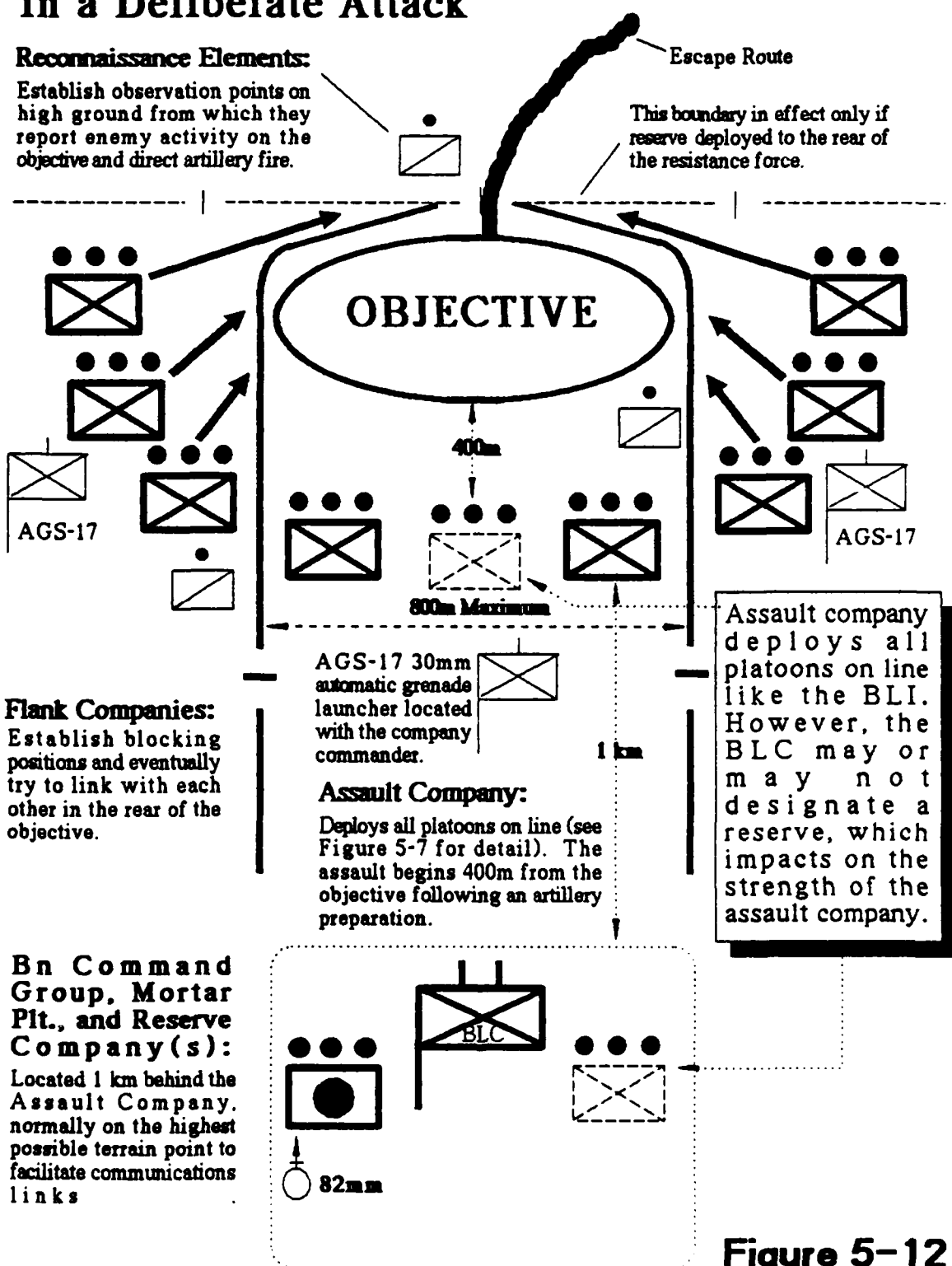
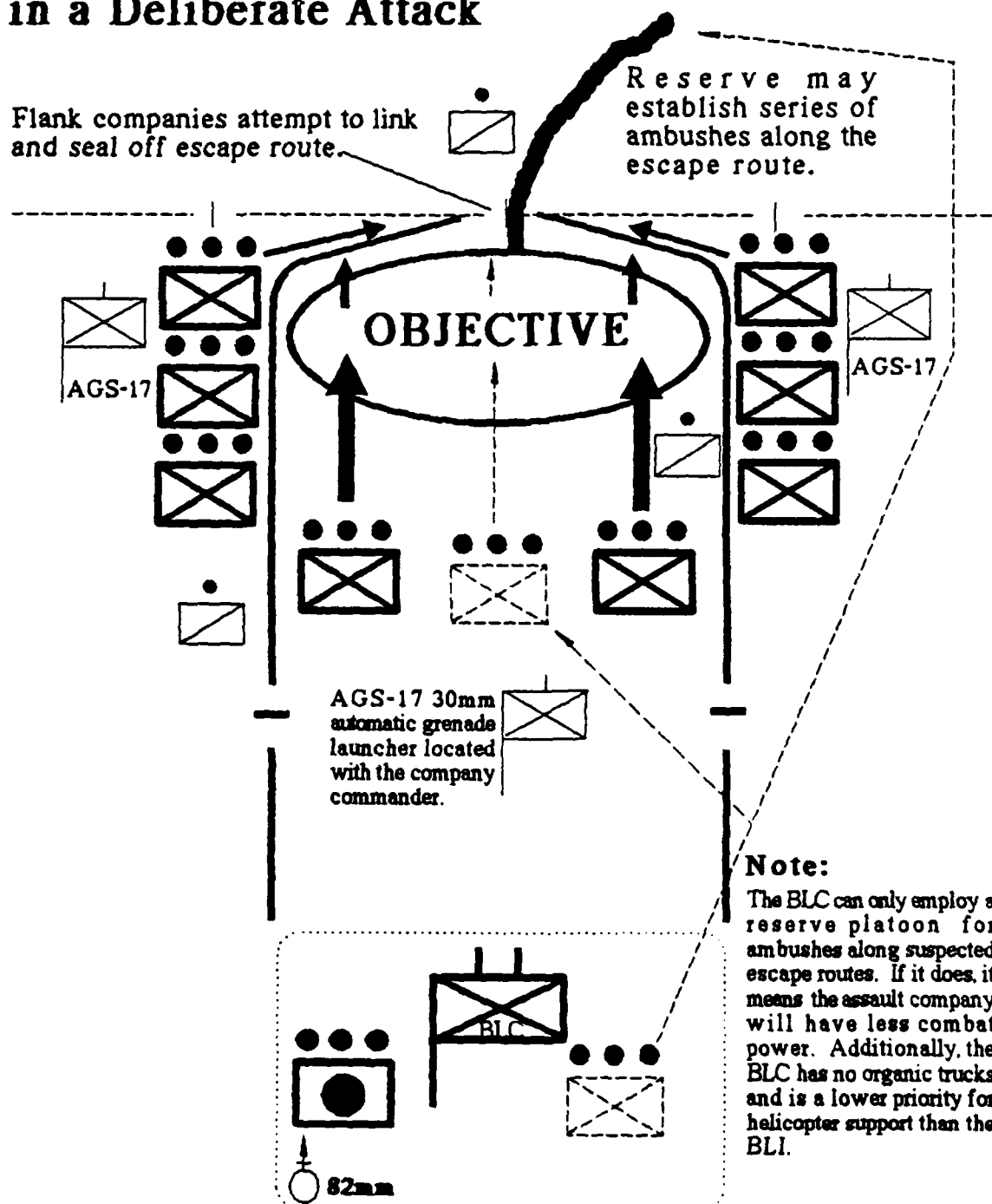


Figure 5-12

BLC (Battalion Operation): Actions on the Objective in a Deliberate Attack



Assault begins with mortar/ GRAD-1P/AGS-17 prep. Assault company sweeps through objective. Flank companies take up blocking positions and fire at targets of opportunity.

Figure 5-13

BLC (Independent Company Operation): Movement to the Objective in a Deliberate Attack.

(When Contra Force is Less Than 40 Men)

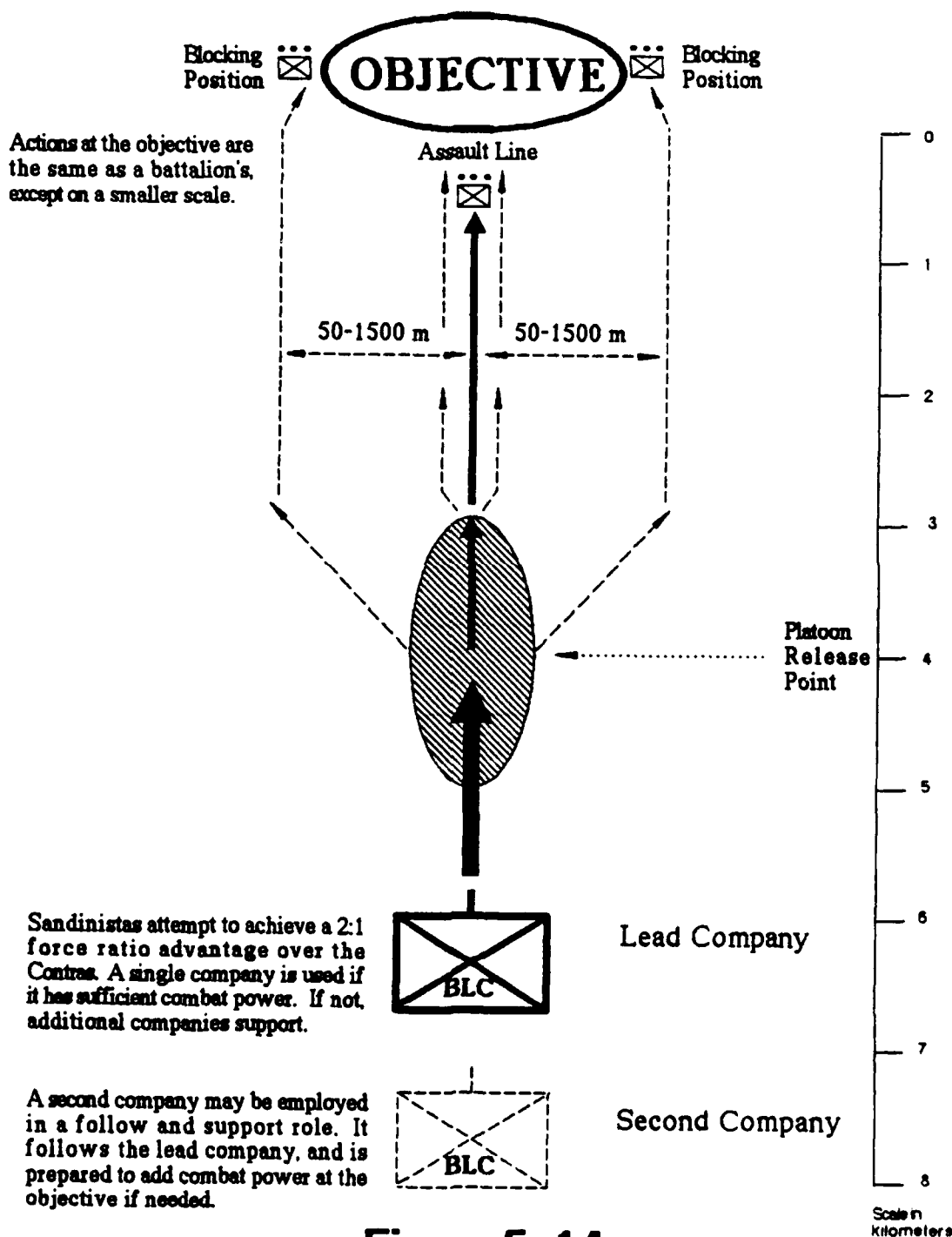
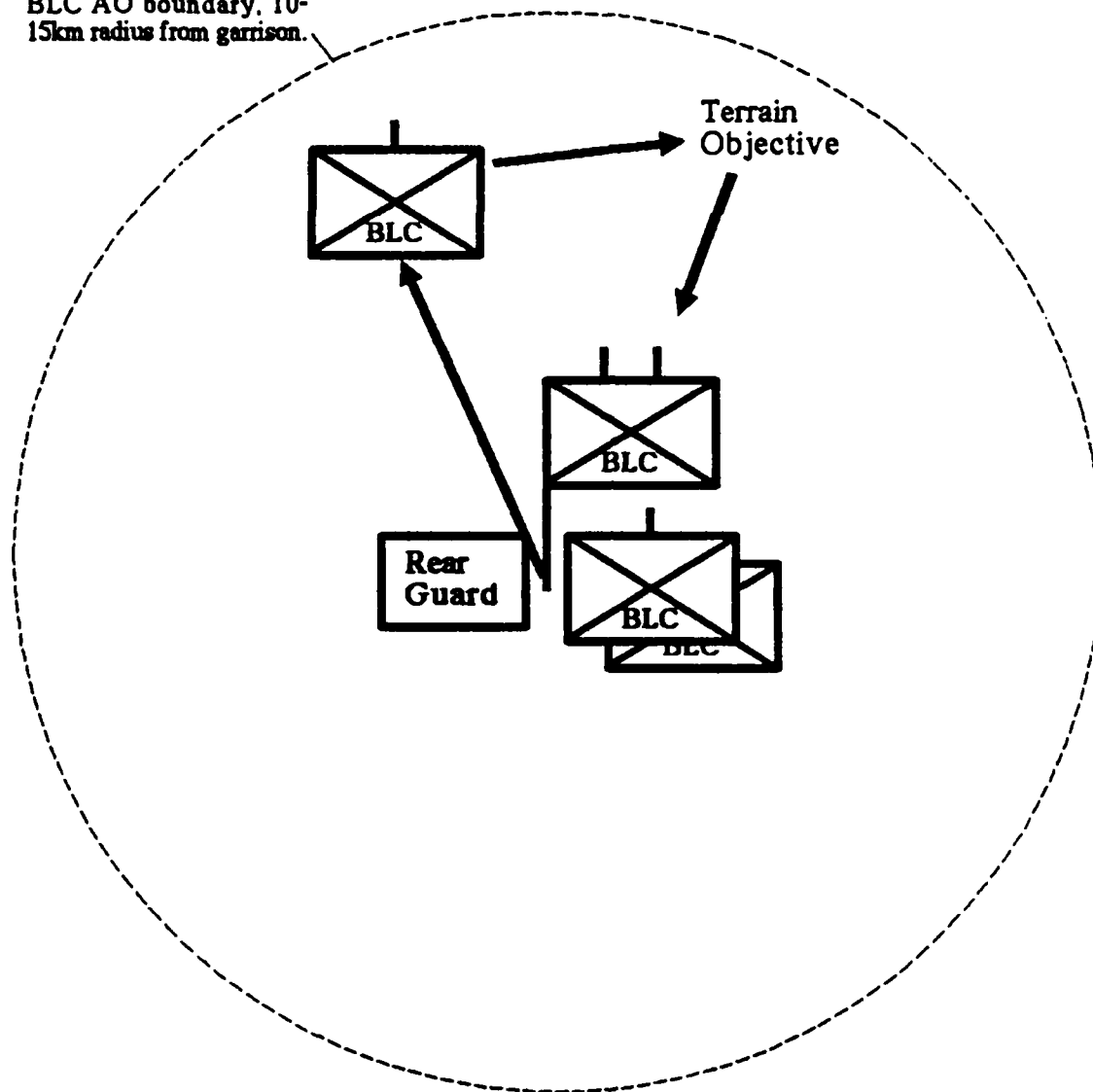


Figure 5-14

BLC (Independent Company Operation): Movement to Contact

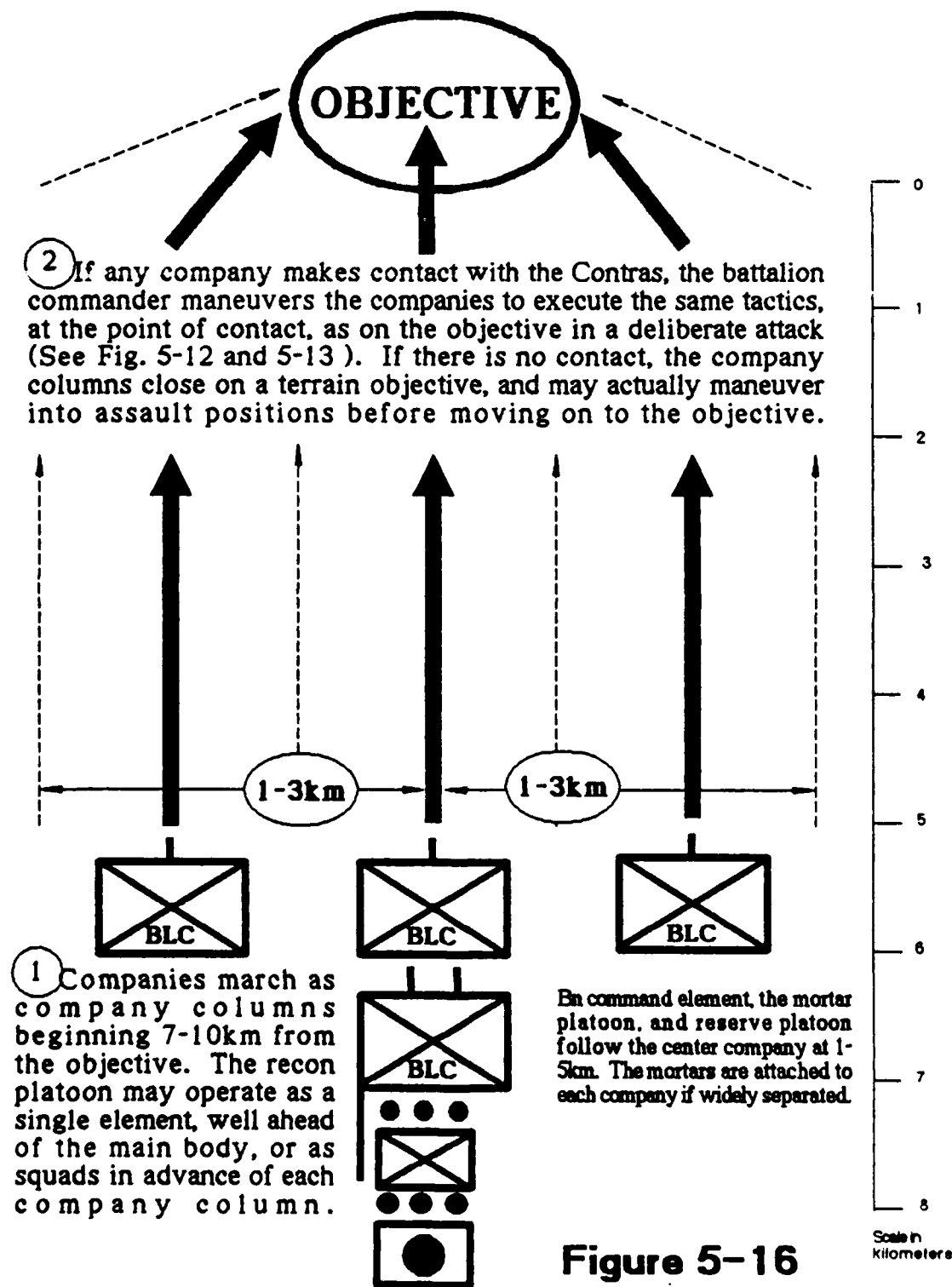
BLC AO boundary, 10-15km radius from garrison.



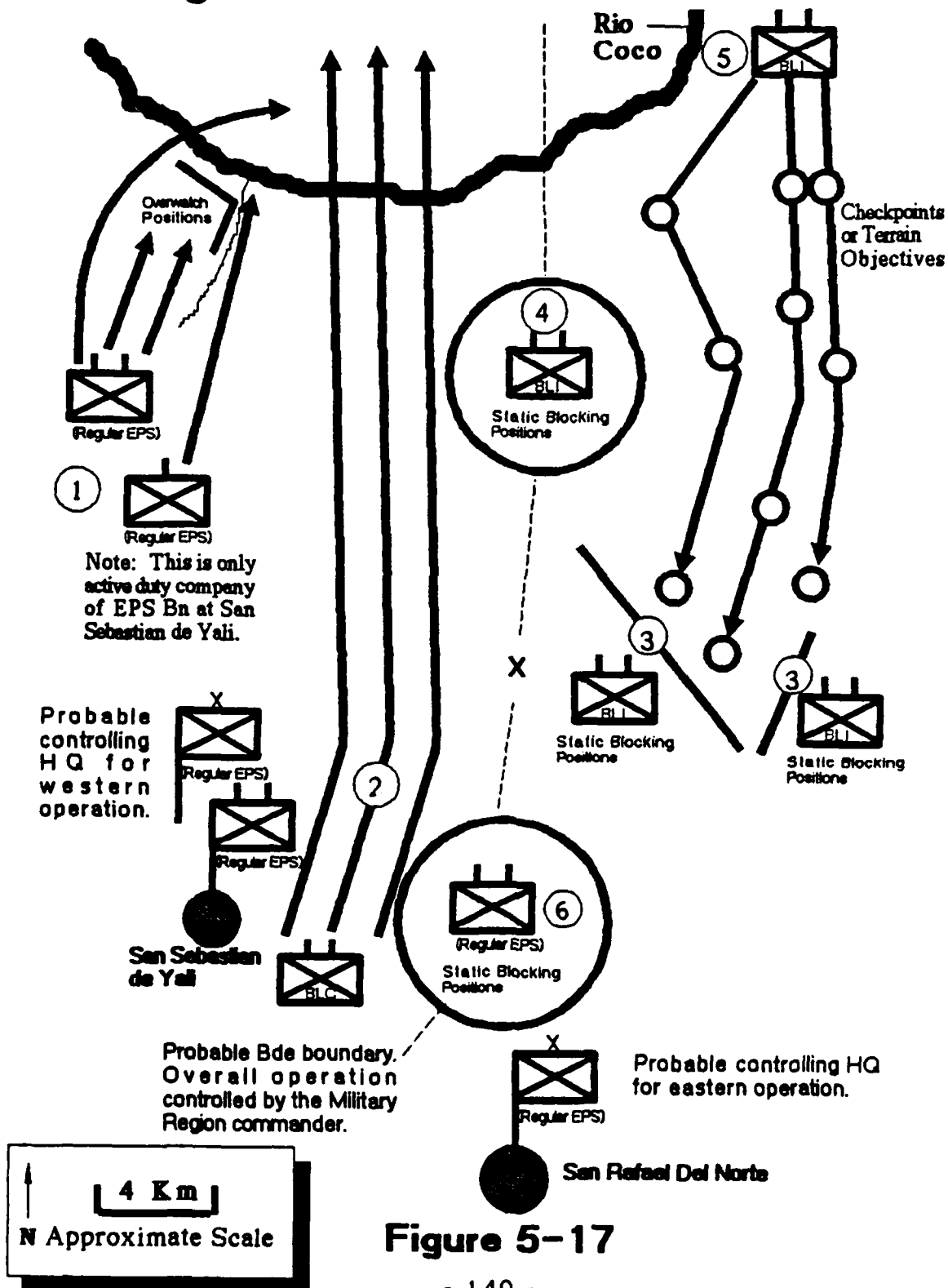
Unlike the BLI, the BLC has a permanent area of operation (AO). The AO is smaller than a BLI's. The Rear Guard is normally located near the center of the AO, and serves as a logistics, administrative, and sometime fire support base. Typically, when Contra activity is light, one company will conduct sweeps in the AO, while the other two have an on order mission to support that company if needed. When Contra activity is high, the entire battalion will conduct the sweeps.

Figure 5-15

BLC (Bn Operation): Movement to Contact (Sweep), Companies Operating Under Bn Control



Multi-Battalion Counterinsurgency Operation in Nicaraguan Interior



Sandinista Punitive Raid

(LZ) Helicopter Landing Zone

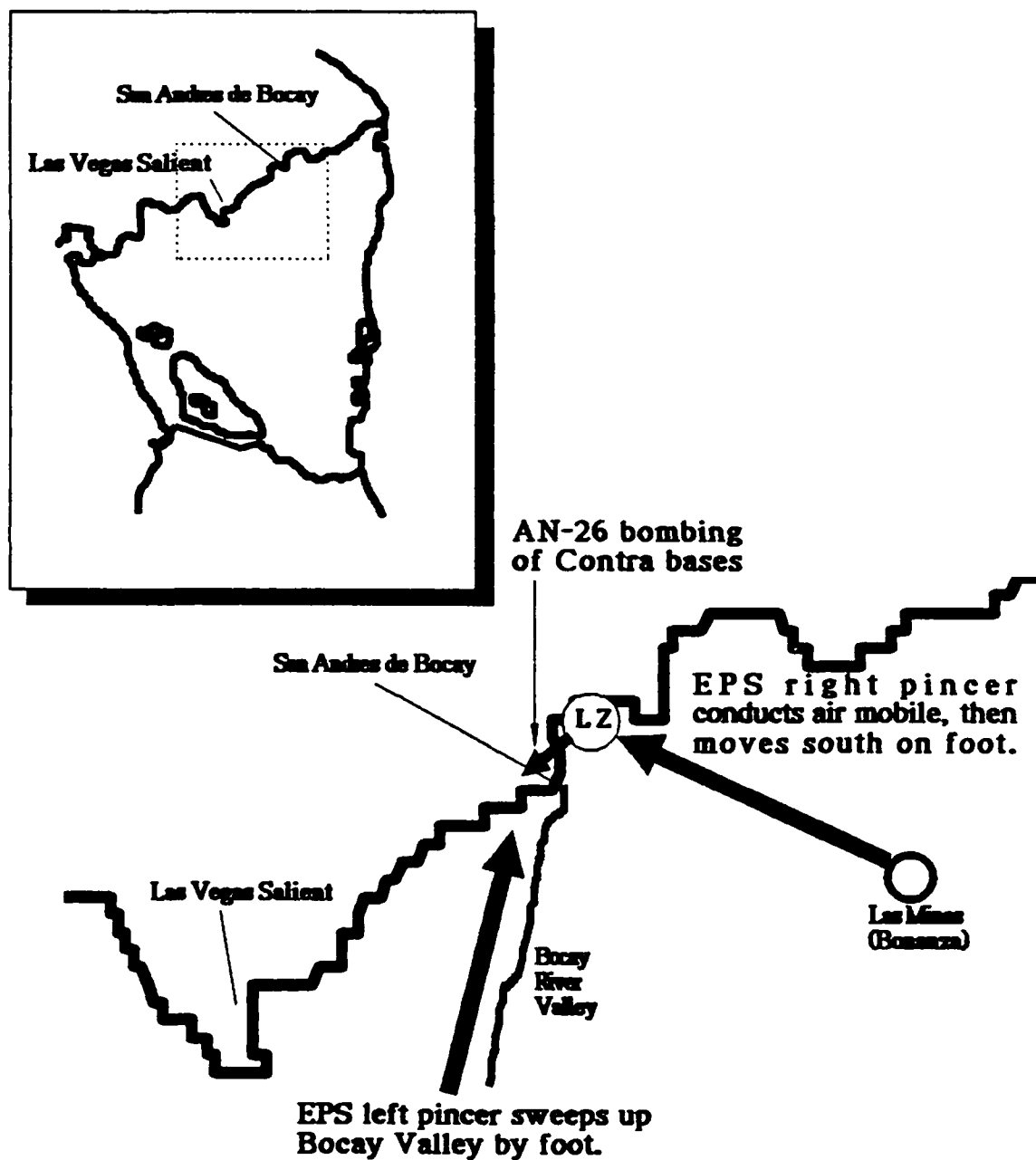


Figure 5-18

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¹⁴Ibid,.

¹⁵Sandinista Counterinsurgency Operations Plan. 1:50,000 scale military map with Soviet style military symbols, depicting a multi-battalion counterinsurgency operation near the Rio Coco, vicinity of San Raphael del Norte in Nicaragua. The document was provided by officials of the Nicaraguan Resistance. The operation reportedly took place in the summer of 1986.

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¹⁷Bernard E. Trainor, "Anti-Contra Drive," New York Times, 21 March 1988, 8(A).

¹⁸H. T. Hayden, "Resistance in Nicaragua," Marine Corps Gazette, September 1988, 67.

¹⁹Julia Preston, "Battle of Bocay Fought on Propaganda Front." Washington Post, 19 March 1988, First Section, A19.

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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

General

In developing a viable counterinsurgency tactical doctrine, two problems confronted the Sandinistas. First, they had to keep the Contras separated from the population in isolated regions of the country. This was to deny the Contras a popular support base and make them an easier target for deliberate attacks. The second problem was to create a tactical capability to strike and destroy the insurgents, once they were isolated.

The Soviets and Cubans played a central role in shaping the Sandinista's counterinsurgency tactical doctrine. However, the nature of the threat, the terrain and weather, equipment, and time were among the other mitigating factors that influenced this doctrine. Consequently, the Sandinistas modified the Soviet concepts of Afghanistan to fit the needs of the EPS in Nicaragua. In other cases, their own experience as guerrillas actually reinforced the validity of the Soviet concepts. This chapter examines how combinations of factors affected the Sandinista's counterinsurgency organizations and their tactics.

Separating and Isolating the Contras

After the fall of Somoza, the Sandinistas began to consolidate the revolution under their leadership. An integral part of this consolidation entailed the defeat of the counterrevolution. Having been guerrillas themselves, they realized that the revolution's center of gravity in this phase would continue to be the Nicaraguan people. In the early years, the Sandinistas enjoyed immense popular support in the Pacific Region and some of the urban areas of the Central Highlands. Therefore, it was likely that the anticipated incipient counterrevolution would emerge in the rural areas that were under marginal Sandinista control. These areas were primarily located in the Central Highlands. It was there that the Sandinistas concentrated their counterinsurgency efforts.

The Sandinista's first step was to deny the Contras a potential base of support by depopulating Contra operating areas. This alone was not sufficient. Contra forces sustained themselves with U.S. and private support through LOCs stretching into Honduras. As a result, the Contras began to operate in force in the rural areas surrounding the secondary population centers of the Central Highlands.

To win the rural battle, the Sandinistas needed a significant force, located in the rural areas, to threaten and destroy the Contras before they could establish any

support. Furthermore, the force needed to protect the population continuously from Contra inroads. Even though the Guardia had consistently defeated the FSLN in tactical operations, they had lacked an effective grass roots counterinsurgency force to maintain security on a continuous basis. Consequently, the FSLN was always able to regenerate after a tactical defeat. This was particularly true when the Sandinistas moved away from the foco strategy and into the Prolonged Popular War (Maoist), Proletarian Tendency (urban), and Tercerista (insurrectionist and Leninist) strategies, that caused them to physically mix with the population.

A widely used concept for protecting populations at the grass roots level, is the creation of locally recruited militias. In protecting their own homes and families, the local militia are usually more motivated than other forces. In addition, it helps to bond the population to the government. The Sandinistas could look to many examples of this concept, but appear to have followed the Cuban militia model, since Cuba's experience against counterrevolution was similar, in some ways, to their own. From this, the Sandinistas created the MPS to act as this local defense force.¹ However, as the Contra threat grew, the Sandinistas realized they needed an active and offensive force rather than a static guard force. Therefore, the Sandinistas created the BLCs as special counterinsurgency forces within

the MPS for offensive actions. Subsequently, the BLC's role in counterinsurgency became so important that they were placed under the operational control of the local EPS brigade commander--even though technically an MPS organization.

A Tactical Concept to Strike the Contras

By isolating Contra forces in the rural areas, the Sandinistas hoped to create a target they could strike with a strong offensive force. To do this, the Sandinistas needed a viable tactical concept and a force that was organized and equipped to execute the tactics. Clearly, these had to be closely integrated efforts. The Soviets were strongly entrenched as the doctrinal mentors of both the Cubans and the Sandinistas. This influence continued in the development of the counterinsurgency doctrine. The Soviets had already developed a tactical concept and a force model in Afghanistan. The Sandinistas simply had to adapt these Soviet concepts to properly fit the war in Nicaragua.

The Soviet's tactical concepts put strong emphasis on surrounding and destroying the insurgent force. In particular, they emphasized the use of air mobile operations to seize terrain and block all insurgent escape routes. They conducted the main attack with tanks and motorized

infantry fighting in a mounted role. The force involved could be large, but the Soviets had begun to emphasize the use of a combined arms battalion task force as its basic counterinsurgency unit in the early 1980s. While Afghan and other Soviet forces secured static locations and LOCs, these battalion task forces conducted the strike operations on insurgent forces.

As this tactical doctrine was emerging in Afghanistan, Soviet and Cuban advisers were developing the EPS as a professional army in Nicaragua. In that role, they instilled the Soviet tactical concepts in the EPS.

The tactical concepts favored by the Soviets confirmed the lessons the Sandinistas had learned as guerrillas themselves. The Guardia had demonstrated that a well-trained battalion, with good tactical mobility, and an effective intelligence organization, was capable of quickly decimating a guerrilla force. Many members of the Sandinista's leadership, such as Tomas Borge (present at Pancasan) and Omar Cabezas, had been personal witnesses to the Guardia's ability to locate, isolate, and destroy guerrilla forces. The efficacy of this capability was surely etched in the Sandinista's minds as they adopted the Soviet tactical doctrine.

Nonetheless, the Sandinistas had to modify the Soviet model significantly. The problems with the difficult terrain and poor LOCs made the heavy armored forces of the

Soviet model unacceptable. In addition, the political risks of creating a large armored force in Nicaragua and the operational costs also argued against this aspect of the Soviet model. The result was a tactical doctrine that emphasized surrounding and destroying insurgents with light forces. In order to give them the speed required to execute these tactics, the Sandinistas compensated by using truck transport and helicopters.

The Sandinistas primarily adopted these tactics for the BLI. With four or five rifle companies, organic fire support, and truck transport, it was essentially a light version of the Soviet battalion task force. It was a force that could move significant distances by truck or helicopter, and then maneuver and fight in difficult terrain. It could move just as quickly to a new area of operations and begin another mission. However, at the local level, these tactics were appropriate for the BLC as well.

Multi-Battalion Operations

It is evident that the Sandinistas wanted to focus on low level operations carried out by single battalions. However, the Contra threat demonstrated a capability to expand substantially as a result of U.S. military funding. Even though this caused a roller coaster effect on Contra military capabilities, they continued to improve as a

fighting force. Therefore, by 1984, the Contras were executing task force sized attacks; and by 1988, they were capable of major operations involving several regional commands.

The Sandinistas responded to this increased capability by demonstrating a capability to execute multi-battalion operations. This included not only major sweeps, but also deliberate attacks. The ability to adjust to a higher level of operations reflected the Soviet and Cuban experience. The Guardia Nacional had never reached this level of complexity.

Impact of Equipment on Tactics

One factor that has broadly influenced all aspects of the EPS has been the issue of military equipment. The Soviets not only provided a tactical concept and organization, but the necessary equipment for counterinsurgency operations as well. In this way, the Soviets shaped the Sandinista force structure and tactical organization through the military equipment they supplied. This was because the specific capabilities of the equipment they provided had a direct impact on tactical operations.

A prime example of this impact was the use of the helicopter. Without the helicopter, the EPS had little more than a numerical advantage over the Contras in the field. With the helicopter (HIND-D and HIP), the EPS accrued the

following combat multiplier capabilities:

- (1) a tactical mobility advantage over the Contras allowing them to strike quickly and support the double envelopment tactics,
- (2) a firepower capability not tied to ground LOCs,
- (3) a logistics support capability not affected by the ground LOCs, allowing for extended operations in remote areas.

Clearly, the use or non-use of the helicopter had a heavy impact on whether the EPS ground tactics were viable or simply a waste of sweat and time. The helicopter was not an isolated example. The AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher gave company commanders an indirect fire weapon that could move with light infantry, yet provide good suppressive fire in close combat. As a tripod mounted, crew-served weapon it was ideal for use in the blocking positions of the double envelopment. It is obvious that Soviet equipment was equally as important as the tactical doctrine and the organization.

Time as a Factor

For the Sandinistas, time was another factor that affected all aspects of their counterinsurgency operations. At the tactical level, the Contras usually fought as small units and massed only for occasional larger operations and

for resupply. Consequently, the Sandinistas had only short windows of opportunity to strike large Contra units. The need for speed was yet another important calling for a substantial helicopter fleet. Moreover, since helicopters have limitations, the time factor harkens back to the need for the BLCs as a local force capable of quick offensive response.

At the strategic level, the time factor was tied closely to the U.S. Congress and the military funding of the Contras. From the 1984 example, the Sandinistas knew that a failure to fund the Contras could cause Contra force strength to decline by about 60 percent. A Contra force of about 4,000 men, with limited sustainment capabilities, probably could be contained. With that potential goal in sight, it was in the Sandinista's interest to use its maximum resources to prevent the Contras from establishing any support base. As a result, the Sandinistas fielded and maintained a huge counterinsurgency force, even in the face of a faltering economy and a manpower problem.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

The Soviets and their Cuban surrogates clearly filled the void left by the destruction of the Guardia Nacional. Their influence was central to the development of the EPS and has continued as of this writing. However, despite the significant effort of the Cubans, the Soviets, and the

Sandinistas themselves, they have not been able to destroy the Contras as a military force. In fact, I have found no evidence in any source that suggests the Sandinista have ever surrounded and destroyed a significant Contra force in the field. Nor have the Sandinistas been able to prevent the Contras from continuing military operations, or expanding their influence inside of Nicaragua--even in the absence of military funding by the United States.

In April of this year (1990), the Sandinistas turned over the Nicaraguan Presidency to Mrs. Violetta Chamorro, of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) coalition, who won control of the presidency in a democratic election. There is a continuing question concerning this event: will the Sandinistas fully turn over the security machine they have created to defend the revolution to UNO leadership?

The Sandinistas have spent considerable time and effort creating a powerful security machine to maintain power. This security machine has Sandinista loyalists at every level of the MINT and EPS, as well as the grass roots CDS organizations. A simple change in top-level leadership does not mean the Sandinistas will loose control of these organizations. The continued presence and influence of Soviet and Cuban advisers in the MINT and EPS further reinforces Sandinista control of the military and security organs. It is important to remember that Mrs. Chamorro was

a member of the Government of National Reconstruction, formed from a broad coalition (including the Sandinistas) after the fall of Somoza. Like many others in the government, the Sandinistas neutralized her political power and eventually forced her out. They are in a position to do this again through the power base they will likely still control.

Perhaps the ultimate Sandinista counterinsurgency tactic has been the establishment of this stratified political power base. Since it extends to the rural population through the CDS and militia organizations, the Sandinistas may continue to have extensive influence away from Managua. Even a democratically elected government will be hard pressed to fully control the Sandinista's activities under these circumstances.

Observers can only speculate on how this new governmental arrangement in Nicaragua will play out. The Sandinista's activities under the UNO government should be studied carefully. The United States supports democratically elected governments around the world--especially those that have replaced Marxist-oriented regimes. But we must remember that an election is only the first step in securing a democratic government.

ENDNOTES, CHAPTER 6

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